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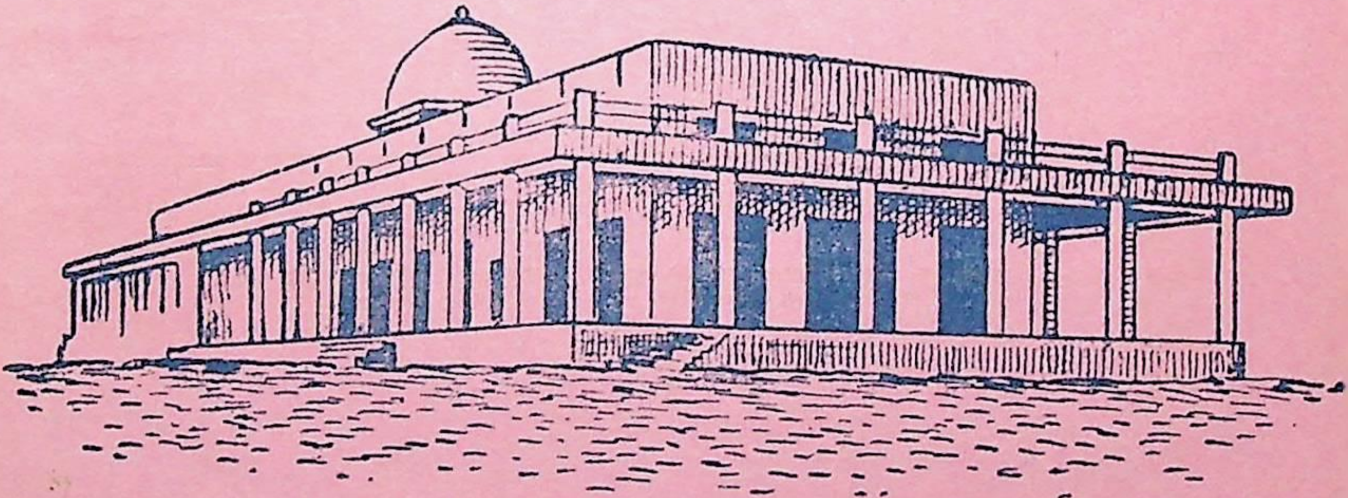
Pathway to God

आत्मा वा अरे दृष्टव्यः ।

(A Quarterly Journal of Spiritual Life)



Academy of Comparative Philosophy & Religion

BELGAUM.

VOL. XVII No. II **January — 1983** **Price Rs. 3/-**

PATHWAY TO GOD

Editor — Prof K. D. Tangod, M. A.

Vol. XVII ● January 1983 ● No. 2

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PATHWAY TO GOD

(Journal of Spiritual Life)

Annual Subscription

Bharat :- Rs. 8/- Foreign. Rs. 20/-

PRAYER TO LORD KRSNA

सच्चिदानन्दरुपाय कृष्णायाक्लिष्टकारिणे ।
नमो वेदान्तवेद्याय गुरवे बुद्धिसाक्षिणे ।।

Obeisance to Krsna whose nature is Sat (being) Cit (consciousness) and Ananda (bliss), who is cognised by the Vedanta, who is the guru (teacher) and witness of buddhi.

- Shri Shankaracharya

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Printed by :-

Rajendra Mudranalaya

79, Tilakwadi, Belgaum.

Published by :-

Shri J. V. Parulekar.
Trustee and Secretary,
Academy of Comparative Philosophy and Religion,
Hindwadi, Belgaum 11.

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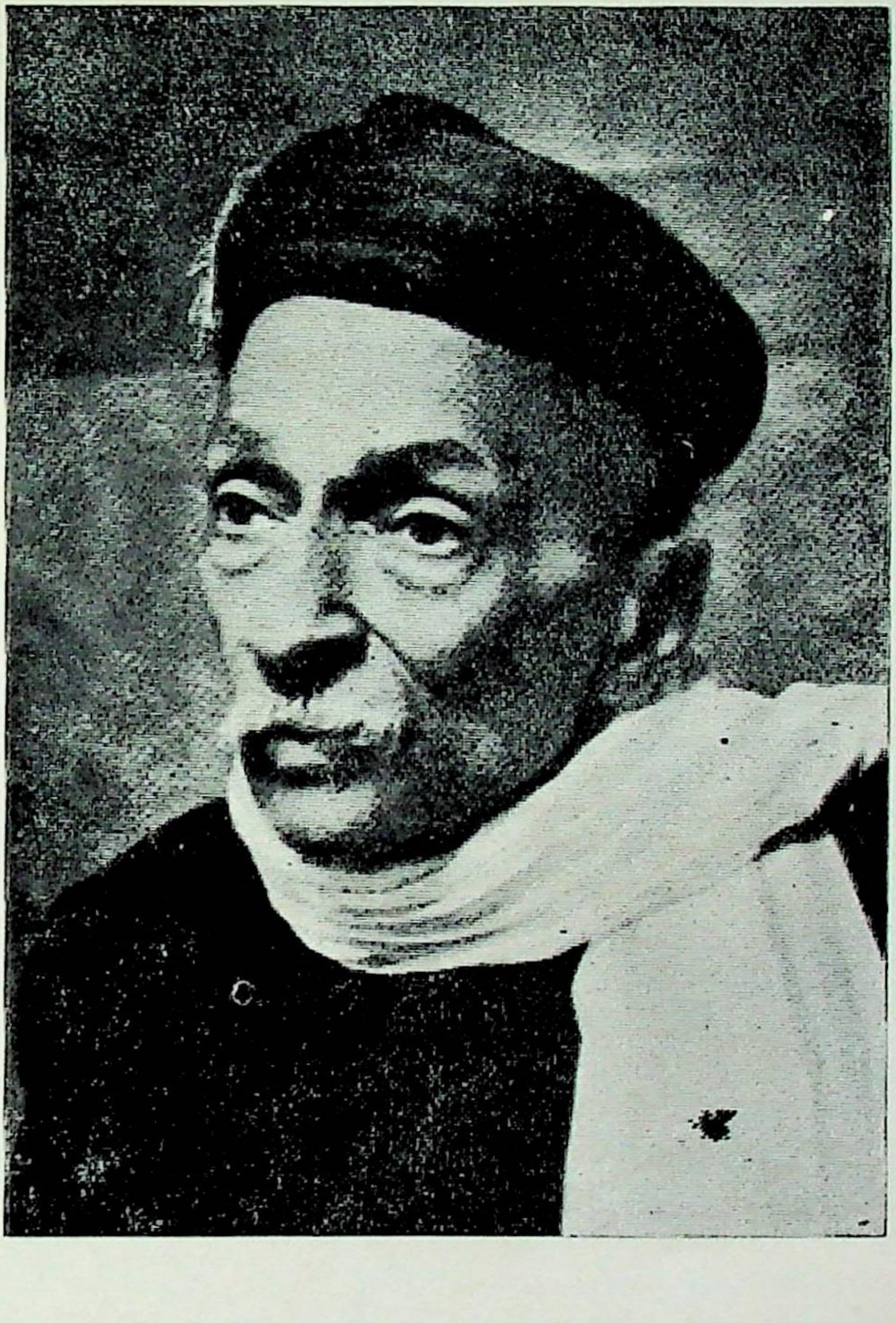

Born – Jamkhandi
3-7-1886

Samadhi – Nimbal.
6-6-1957

EDITORIAL

It is for the first time in the history of our journal that we are bringing out an issue completely devoted to the Alvars, the mystic – saints of Tamil Nad in South India. The readers will find in these pages, informative articles on twelve prominent Alvars contributed by Sri. K. E. Parthasarathi of Madras, one of our regular contributors. The narration of the life and teachings of the Alvars given in this issue, though not exhaustive,is sure to interest our readers. If the details presented here inspire our readers to undertake the study of the lives and teachings of the Alvars with a view to following the path leading to the spiritual elevation and salvation of the aspirants shown by them,the purpose of this issue will be fully served.

There is no dearth of mystics and saints in India.Several of them from ancient times till now have appeared on our land,and rendered it holy by their activites, and teachings. The Alvars are the most ancient Vaishnava saints to whom the whole of mankind should ever remain grateful for their service to humanity.They were persons who had deep intuitive knowledge of God and were immersed in the comtemplation of Him,As the present author points out their birth was foretold by the Bhagavat Purana which stated that the devotees of Narayana would be born on the banks of Tamraparni, Cauvery,Palar and other rivers in South India.A yogi has defined "Alvar" as a golden river of love and ecstacy which find dynamic peace in satchitananda.An Alvar is the"living Gita", "breathing Upanishad," "a moving temple" and "hymning torrent of rapture." " They were made for God, manufac tured for God and destined for God". Traditionally it is believed that they were the incarnations of the Lord's servants, weapons or ornaments.

Alvars are the authors of several devotional songs traditionally called Prabandhas composed mostly in Tamil language. They are valued by the traditional leaders, learnt,taught and sung at the time of worship, Prabandha is styled Ubhaya

Vedanta consisting of the Sanskrit philosophic Vedanta and Tamil poetic Vedanta. Because of their poetic beauty as also philosophic and religious preachings they are sure to appeal to the people of all sects.

Alvars came from different castes. Seven of them were Brahmins, one was a Kshatriya, two were Shudras and one was of the low Panar caste. Except one woman Alvar by name Goda or Andal, the adopted daughter of Periyalvar all Alwars were men.

The Alvars were not given to any philosophical speculation but only to experiences of the emotion of love for God. Yet we find in their songs a vivid account of the nature of God Supreme, the unlimited grace of His,the soul, the devotion and its forms, miseries of the world, grief caused by the separation from God and so on. From their writings Ramanuja, the founder of visistadvaita school of Vedanta drew much inspiration and food for his system of thought. In the Prabandhas Alvars have given expression to their love of God treating themselves as His children, friends, servants, and beloveds.

Alvars were devotees who belived in the impermanence of worldly enjoyment and in the acquisition of freedom from births and deaths by union with Vishnu, through loving surrender to His will. They were Ekantikas who worshipped Vishnu alone whom they call by the various names of Bhagavat, Purusha, Vasudeva and Narayana. The Lord,according to them is eternal,endless and imperishable and creator even Brahma and Rudra. He is the seed of the universe, its soul. The animate and the inanimate existences are only the modes of His-limbs (Sesa) constituting His body as it were. He is omnipotent, infinite and immeasurable. The Vedas cannot reach Him. He is knowledge and bliss, a mass of intelligence and love. Though supreme Brahman, He limits Himself in images.

The individual soul, according to the Alvars, is only a mode of the Supreme. It is the property of the Lord who is its ruler and possessor. It is eternal. The Lord is its very life. When pure, it recognises God and nothing else. It struggles against the earthly illusions to obtain the privilege of His company and service. It is this service which is the eternal happiness of the soul and prevents its return to the world. The Alvars aimed at the service in Vaikuntha by performing it in this world in relation to Arcavataras. Service to the Lord includes service to his lovers; the Lord's devotees should be loved as much as the Lord. God's gracious love to man prompts Him to create things and animate them to attain Him; man's love to God is his spiritual inspiration.

The obstacles to be overcome are the contact with matter, the desire for worldly things and the love of self which confounds the body with the soul. The idea of ' me ' and 'mine' must be given up; one should surrender oneself completely to God. It is not obligatory to renounce the world it is enough if duty is performed for God's sake without an eye to the fruits thereof. Service to the Lord is not for the benefit of the devotee, but for the sake of the Lord. The body, though an obstacle to the union with God, is not useless for, it reveals the Lord's grace to man. It is the privilege of man to experience various ills in this body and seek the Lord in the midst of them unlike angels who worship Him in the midst of happiness. It is for the sake of the Sinner that the Lord has His avataras and His limitations in images.

Another great feature of the doctrine of the Alvars is that it extends the consolation of religion to all sorts of people. The path of self-surrender (prapatti) which the Alvars advocate is characterised by no restriction in regard to knowledge. social status, observance etc. It affords consolation to the most depressed and fallen among mankind [1]

The hymns of the Alvar reveal the greatness of the arca (idol) worship and of parama bhakti or parama prema (supreme love). " The spiritual love which finds expression in their songs is sometimes an earnest appeal of direct longing for union with Krishna or an expression of the pangs of separation, or a feeling of satisfaction and enjoyment from union with Krishna in a direct manner or sometimes through an emotional identification with the legendary personages associated with Krishna's life '' Alvars were probably the pioneers in showing how love for God may be on terms of equality,softening down to the rapturous emotion of conjugal love.[2]

The hymns of Alvars and their commentaries contain several valuable gems of truth which constitute the divine wisdom of the saints. To mention a few of them here–True renunciation is of mind. Vile are the ways of the world. To be a Vaishnava is to belong to God. To belong to God is to be like God Himself, i. e. to conform to the ideals and ideas practised by His great devotees. Fear of God will go if we understand that we are all His children. Sins will cease as soon as we realise our relationship with God. God is alwaya impatient to save souls like a hungry man who is impatient to wait for a fully cooked food. God is the first Guru seated in the hearts of all. The dust of the feet of God's holy saints is effiacious in healing god–sick souls. To be a liege to God's saints is of greater virtue and value than allegiance to God Himself direct. God with us is success. His presence is strength and absence weakness.[3]

- Editor.

References :

1) The Cultural Heritage of India Vol. IV Part 1–9. Pp 169-70.

2) History of Indian Philosophy by S. N. Dasgupta, Vo. III Chapter XVII Pp 68–80.

3) Introduction to this issue by K E. Parthasarathy, Pp11-12

Introduction

The Alvars

The Alvars or mystics " sunk in the ocean of Divine Love ", were twelve in number and were born at different places and lived at different times. The birth of these saints is foretold by the Bhagavata Purana, which states that the devotees of Narayana would be born on the banks of Tamraparani, Cauvery, Palar and other rivers in South India. According to traditional accounts, they were born in the beginning of Kaliyuga. Modern research has placed them between the 5th and 9th century A. D. Three early Alvars known as Poygai Alvar, Bhutatalvar, and Peyalvar who are called the nudal (first) Sic Alvars, were followed by Tirumalisai Alvar, Nammalvar, Madurakavi Alvar, Kulasekhara Alvar, Periyalvar, Andal, Tondaradipoddi Alvar and Tiruppanaralvar. The last was Tirumangai Alvar, who is said to be a contemporary of Sambandar, the greatest Saivaite saint.

The late Prof. S. Krishnaswami Iyengar, a great historian of Vaishnavism has considered that Alvars can be classified into three groups according to the traditional accounts– the ancient, the middle and the last.

Ancient : 1) Poygai Alvar, 2) Bhutatalvar, 3) Peyalvar 4) Tirumalisai Alvar.

Middle : 5) Nammalvar, 6) Madurakavi Alvar 7) Kulasekhara Alvar, 8) Periyalvar 9) Andal.

Last : 10) Tondaradipoddi Alvar 11) Tiruppanar Alvar, 12) Tirumangai Alvar.

Though definite dates of birth are not known of these Alvars, it is, however, considered that the above traditional order is in accord with chronological sequence. This order has been recognised as such from the ancient times down to the present day.

It is most unfortunate that only scanty details are available about the lives of the Alvars. While their followers had been apparently careful in preserving the writings of their masters, they had not been anxious to preserve a record of even the ordinary details of their lives. The traditional accounts available, though imperfect, are not without mention of the miracles in their lives. But these miracles do not constitute the essence of their lives or their teachings. The main sources of information for the history of the Alvars are mainly the following :

1) Guruparamparai Prabhavam of Pinbalakiya Perumal Jiar. 2) The Divya Shri Charita of Gurudavahana Pandita. 3) The Upadesa ratna mala of Manavala Manuni. It gives the list of Alvars and the naksatra (asterism) of their birth and other useful information regarding them.

4) Nalayiradivya Prabandham - the collection of works of the Alvars. It contains mention of either contemporary events or past incidents, the names and achievements of kings during which period the Alvars lived, which helped the research scholars in determining the limits to the age of Alvars. The commentaries on the Divya Prabandham and more especially those on Tiruvoimozhi of Nammalvar (word of mouth) are replete with reminiscences of the sayings and doings of the Acharyas and afford an insight into the history of the Alvars and their greatness.

"Alvar" literally means " one who sinks or dives deep". They were divers into the ocean of countless auspicious attributes of God and remained immersed in the devout contemplation of His divine glories. They were the eternal devotees of the Lord who came down in human form to demonstrate by precept and example the nature of devotion to the mortals on earth, to remove afflictions of the lowly, the indigent and the helpless. In other words, they came down to resuscitate religion and help men move forward in their onward march to spiritual progress and enlightenment. They were true mahatmas. A yogi has defined "Alvar " as " a golden river of love and ecstasy which find dynamic peace in sat-citananda " An Alvar is the " living Gita ", " breathing Upanishad ", a " moving temple and " a hymning torrent of divine rapture ". They were the inseparable property of the Lord. They aimed at service in

Vaikuntha by performing it in this world in relation to archa avataras. Service to the Lord included service to His devotees also. " They were made for God, manufactured for God, and destined for God ". They saw God everywhere and in every thing. They were Gods on earth. God spoke through them making use of them as His mouth piece The magnetic influence of God's saving power of love radited through these saints.

The Alvars were born mystics and their mysticism is also known as Vedanta since they only continued the traditions of Risis and are called ubhaya Vedantins. They were the seers of the reality, as it is proclaimed by them-" Non-Kandu-konden, non-kandu-konden " - " I have seen, I have seen, " and as the Upanishad says " Paripasyanti dhirah " (the wise always see). They had direct and immediate experiences of God or Brahmanubhava.

Their intuitions were of exalted and illuminating character and free from dogmatism, emotion, and egotism. Being of suddha sattva nature, they were free from rajasa and tamasa gunas. Their experiences were deeply spiritual though they spoke in the language of common man and adopted the conventional techinique of Tamil poetry. In spite of distinctions of birth, status and sex, they had complete spiritual affinity or kinship. They had the same messages to give to all, rich or poor, learned or iiliterate, high or low for the spiritual uplift and betterment. They were propagators of a religion of universal love based on the Upanishadic teaching that Brahman is in the hearts of all jivas as their inner Ruler and Enjoyer.

The bhakti or love of the Alvars falls broadly into the following moods. 1) Santha bhava, 2) dasa bhava, 3) Sakhya bhava, 4) Vatsalya bhava 5) madhura bhava (i. e. perfect peace, perfect servanthood, perfect companionship, perfect parental affection and perfect affection of the beloved and devoted wife). The last bhava is the mood of Andal to Sri

Krishna. The remaining Alvars represent one or other of the above forms of bhakti.

There are three definite stages in the bhakti of the Alvars. Para bhakti i e. to have a direct vision of God, develops into para jnana i. e. the achievement of the direct vision of God which develops into parama bhakti i. e the desire to have the experience of that vision for ever and ever.

The bhakti of the Alvars is love of God for love's sake. It conforms to the definitions given by Narada and Sandilya in their Bhakti Sutras. Bhakti is itself the fruit of all the other yogas - karma and jnana and is a comparatively easy sadhana for the attainment of salvation. In the path of bhakti pursued by the Alvars there is place both for jnana and karma It is rasa (joy) and God himself is an embodiment of rasa– raso vaisah.It is of the nature of param prema (supreme love) and nectar. It leads to siddhi or perfection. It is based on self–control and self denial. It implies total dependence on God and surrender to Him. It is its own reward and is superior to jnana and karma.

The bhakti of the Alvars points out an important aspect. When the love of a devotee expresses itself in the forms of various kinds of service or kainkarya, the spirit of a devotee should be that of a loyal servant or devoted wife. Just as a loyal servant or devoted wife does not expect return or even gratitude from the master or husband for all the services that are rendered as offering of love, similarly the devotee sees only God in every creature and all his activities will therefore take the form of an offering of pure love to God without any motive for even any recognition from Him. He loves because he cannot help loving God and he serves because his love must find an outlet in service. According to an oft – quoted Sloka in Sanskrit " A devotee must lovingly and dotingly please God as a chaste wife pleases her husband, as a mother pleases her child, as a disciple pleases his teacher and as a friend pleases his comrade.

Sri Krishna considers that bhakti is the raja vidya (the king of spiritual service) raja gubya (the supreme spiritual secret) and is the essence of dharma and is easy to practise and is imperishable in its results (B. G. IX-2). Narada sums up his Bhakti Sutras stating that in all three real and eternal periods of time (past, present and future) bhakti is the supreme means.

The Alvars lived constantly in the presence of God and were in communion with Him. This eternal and inseparable union is to them true immortality.Tnat is why ignoring salvation, the Alvars craved for only devotion or bhakti, e. g. Tondaradipoddi Alvar, Kulasekhara Alvar (yearned to be a chetana and to be near God always). To Nammalvar,the Godhead in Kumbakonam temple was aravamudu which means 'necťar endless'. Pillai Lokacharya in his Mumukshuppadi says. "Love pursued even after bliss is gained, adds zest to the bliss". Parasara Bhattar speaks of " love and bliss is as one truth". Kulasekhara Alvar in his Mukundamala says that he is not aware of any other bliss equal to the nectar of constantly remembering the holy name of Hari, and he invites us to drink the nectar called Krishna for the supreme panacea for all worldly ills and which gives eternal bliss. Bhakti Rasayana says : "Bhakti is the supreme goal of man's endeavour ; it is incomparable and unalloyed bliss '.

The hymns of the Alvars speak eloquently about the necessity and importance of the graceof God Man is known for his weaknesses, failings, limitations and helplessness. At one stage or other he is forced to seek the help of some highter power and yearns for its grace. This is reminiscent of the teachings of the Upanishads. Itihasas and Puranas. In the Vedic period, people offered prayers to deities like Varuna, Agni, etc. for grace and for freedom from sins and calamities. Without His grace, liberation is not possible. Yamevaisha Vrunute tena labhyah (it is attained by him whom God chooses) (Kathopanishad), and jushtah tenamrutam tvameti (liked by Him, he attains immortality) The Gita, which is the essence of the Upanishads also emphasises the importance of divine grace.The Mahabharata abounds in references to Lord's Daya : "Only he can realise Narayana to whom He is gracious". Divine grace never comes until the mind is purified by continued acts of selfsacrifice. God's grace descends on man like a breeze but if he wants to get it he may have to do spiritual practices as the boat-man must unfurl the sails before he can catch the breeze.

God is described as an ocean of mercy or grace. But a careful consideration will show that this is not an adequate description. The ocean is a finite thing limited in space whereas His grace is infinite and unlimited. Although a non-doer, the Lord out of sheer kripa or grace engages Himself in His activities. The creation, sustenance and destruction of the cosmos are the dayalila of the Lord. Though not subject to brith, he incarnates Himself from time to time for the redemption of souls, for diffusing the light of wisdom (jnana), for the suppression of evil through the destruction of evil doers, and for infusing love and piety among the people. Though supreme Brahman and infinite in nature, He limits himself in images as arca forms for the easy accessibility of the devotees His unmotivated and supreme daya is the sole cause of these phenomena. He, as Krishna assumed a transcendental form of beauty for captivating humanity and ravishing the seekers out of fleshly feelings and transmuting their souls into His blissful nature.

The vedas, Upanishads, itihasas and Puranas and Sastras came into existence as a result of His grace. Legendary accounts show that the Lord Himself has inspired the Alvars to sing about His glory. Nammalvar has sung : "The Lord enlightened me of His effulgent glory and Himself entered into tongue and sang good and melodious poetry to become enjoyable to the devout bhaktas. I do not know how I can forget Him. It is evident that God attached great value to the deliverances when given through the medium of the beloved saints as to His own.

The Lord appeared to them as formless and with forms-para, vyuha, vibhava, antaryami and arca. To them, He was as real and immanent in arca forms as He was real and transcendent in Vaikuntha. In arca troms, they saw varied visions of beauty.Each of them presented to them different attributes of the Lord, and theyhad sung about their glory. According to them,the Lord,Narayana,appears in two spheres in the transcendental region called nitya vibhuti and in the material universe called lila vibhuti. They looked upon Him as their father. mother, friend, companion and as their master. They deemed themselves as His eternal servitors and found themselves overwhelmed with His saulabhya and sausilya qualities (i.e. easy accessibility and disposition).

In their attachment to God, the Alvars were circumscribed by a six-fold relation :

1) " By Him appropriable "-To be for His use or purpose.
2) "To Him entrustable "-The soul is committed to God's care. It is under His control and can never be separated from Him.
3) " With God consolate"-This is samslesa or conjunction with God.The soul's real consultation is to be with God and God alone.
4) "With God disconsolate"-This is vislesa "or separation from God.
5) "By God enjoyable". The soul is for God's joy and enjoyment.
6) " By God fulfillable" - The final disponsal of all mattere lies in God's hands.

Altogether the above six-fold relation gives the idea of the soul as the property of God which can never be alinenated from Him. By this relation, God is bound to bestow every care on the soul. The soul's happiness consists in fellowship wtih God, the absence of which is misery. The soul exists for God's joy and enjoyment and its destiny lies in His hands.

The lives of Andal and the Alvars especially those of Nammalvar and Tirumangai Alvar are classic examples of bridal mysticism. Andal vowed herself to no other being honet he less than Sri Krishna – "Not for any mortal am I bespoken". Drawn by His beauty, she pined and panted for Him and in her desperate moods of separation, she taunted Him freely for His cruelty. The soul - hunger of Sri Krishna exceeded the God–hunger of Andal, and at last the two became one in eternal wedlock of mystic union.

The Alvars seek God as the soul of their souls and are immersed in the joy of mystic union. They have conveyed their mystic expernences through the symbology of nayaka-nayaki relation. The bride is the soul that yearns for divine union and the Lord who is the Soul of the soul and is one with it is the bridgroom.The joy of the first union is momentary. It is followed by separation. The forelorn bride is sick-minded and desolate and suffers from the agonies of separation. Her beauty fades away and her spirits are depressed. The bride sends messages of love through the herons,the bees, the brids and the cloud. The mood of the bride changes from despondency to defiance.She takes the offensive and resorts to the ultimatum of medal like Tirumangai Alvar. She gives up modesty and fear of public opinion and openly denounces His cruel desertion. But her feminine love reassert itself and the mood changes from reprisal to remorse and she longs for reunion. At length, the spiritual union of the Lord and the Alvar takes place. The bridal mysticism also fits into the different stages of bhakti-para jnana and parama bhakti.

The Alvars not only yearned for direct experiences of God for themselves but also invited and appealed to the humanity to have similar experiences. They longed to share their ananda or bliss with others and this constitutes the highest social and spiritual service rendered by them to the jivas. Their utterances would hardly fail to move the hearts of the devotees and to induce them to fall in line with them. Notable examples are those of Periyalvar,Nammalvar and Tirumangai Alvar.

The religion of the Alvars is Sri Vaishnavism and not mere Vaishnavism because "Sri" i.e. Goddess Lakshmi, the divine consort of Narayana is made to have an important function to perform in it. We are forced to face the problem of how the mercy of the loving God may be reconciled with the strict impartiality of the absolutely just God. It is in a sitution like this we naturally feel the need for the kindly interposition of a suitable intermediary between us and God an intermediary who on the one hand is willing and able to excess our faults and on the other hand, effectively approaches the Almighty God with the petition for mercy of His weak and errihg creatures. Sri Vaishnavism looks upon Lakshmi, the Divine Mother of the Universe as such an interceder. All mankind, all living beings are His children. If all mankind happen to be His children and if Mother Laksmi interceded between the weak and suffering mankind on the one hand and the Almighty God on the other, none can be kept out of the Holy of Holies and none can be looked upon as unworth to receive the grace of God.

The dual-non-dual relation of I'svara-I'svari is a unique feature of Sri Vaishnavism, I'svara (Narayana) rules by law and I'svarai (Lakshmi) by love, and the two are glued together as one. Hence the name of Narayana as Sriyahpati. It is Divine Motherhood that is the operative grace of God which consists in forgiveness and the redemption of the sinner from his ways of wickedness. Mother's love is spontaneous and she forgives sins by her overflowing love.

In Vaishnavaism Lakshmi who plays the part of mediator is called Purusakara i.e.taking to the Purusa or the Supreme Reality. The function of the Purusakara is to plead both with the sinner and the Absolute i. e. to plead with the former to repent and with the latter to relent. The Purusakara, theme is usually explained by alluding to Valmiki Ramayana. Sita is Purusakara, Rama is the Lord, and Ravana, Kakasura and others are sinners. She tried to advise Ravana in spite of the cruel treatment meted out to her.She prevented Hanuman from killing the Rakshasis who tormented her so much in the Asoka garden.The episode of the crow is another typical instance of the kindness of Sita for suffering beings in spite of their cruel offences. Lakshmi as Purusakara mitigated the anger of Nrisimha which exceeded all bounds after the destruction of Hiranya kasipu and kept the divya mangala vigraha of the Lord cool. It was at the instance of Puruskara sakti the Lord hurried with terrific speed for the succour of Gajendra the Lord of elephants. These episodes have been referred to and the glory of Narayana as Sriyahpati enjoyed by the Alvars.

The experiences and the teachings of the Alvars in their hymns constitute to a certain extent the basis for the philosophy of Visistadvaita inculcated by Ramanuja. God is truth, knowledge and bless and full of attributes or kalyana gunas. Nammalvar was the first to expound the Sarira-Sariri bhava i.e. the universe is the body hof te Supreme Soul of which body all things, animate and inanimate, are only limbs. The individual soul is only a mode of the Supreme. It is the property of the Lord who is its ruler and possessor. Kainkarya or service to the Lord or His devotees is summum bonum of one's life on earth. The obstacles to be overcome in this connection are contact with matter, the desire for wordly things and the love of self which confounds the body with the soul. The idea of 'Me' and 'mine' should be given up. It is not necessary to renounce the world. It is enough if duty is performed for God's sake without an eye to the fruits thereof. The body, though an obstacle to union with God, is not useless for it reveals the Lord's grace to man and should be utilised only for His service. It is for the sake of sinners that He descends as avataras without losing His infinite nature. Though Supreme Brahman, He limits himself in images as arca forms. Salvation for the individual is through devotion and self-surrender.

By performing one's duty without caring for the fruits, one will attain a knowledge of one's self which will lead to vairagya or detachment from earthly pleasures and will direct attention only towards God and His service. The attainment of moksa, is a positive act according to Nammalvar and means the enjoyment of bliss with the Supreme Being.

Tondaradipoddi Alvar and Tirumangai Alvar have expounded the efficacy and importance of the names of God. Madurakavi Alvar has claimed Nammalvar as his guru and saviour.He would sing in praise of the guru even in preference to the Lord. His hymns point out that one can attain salvation by means of devotion to a guru.Service and attachment to a guru are of greater importance than even service to God.

The hymns of the Alvars were collected and later compiled by a great Yogi called Nathamuni. precursor of Ramanuja. They are called Nalayiradivya Prabandham or "The book of four Thousand Stanzas". They are recited in all Sri.Vaishnavite temples as forming the Tamil Veda. These hymns are the outpourings of the Alvars, religious and spiritual consciousness. The most significent feature is that they reveal the greatness of the arca (idol) worship and of Parama bhakti The hymns are sweet beyond expression and beam with the passion of perfect love. The Prabandham is a veritable treasure of divine knowledge.full of light, love, beauty,harmony and bliss.The hymns are mantras of the reality, torrents of beatitude and the thrill of divine presence will be felt, whenever they are considered as important as the Upanishads and the Prabandham is styled ubhaya Vedanta as a doubled Vedanta consisting of the Sanksrit philosophic Vedanta and the Tamil poetic Vedanta. On account of propaganda carried on by Nathamuni the Prabhahdham has been given the same status and importance as the Vedas. He has also proved that this was not inferior to the works in Sanskrit This has given rise to a new and extensive type of religious literature in South India-half Tamil and half Sanskrit style called manipravala style a combination of gem and the coral, the gem representing Sanskrit and coral representing Tamil. The object of which is to inter pret the Tamil Veda and reconcile its teachings with those of Prasthanatraya, Srutis and Smritis,Itihasas and Puranas.

The hymns of the Alvars and their commentaries also contain several valuable gems of truth which constitute the divine wisdom of the saints. A few are given here. True renunciation is of the mind. Vile are the ways of the world. To be a Vaishnava is to belong to God. To belong to God is to be like God Himself, i. e. to conform to the ideals and ideas practised by His great devotees. Fear of God will go, if we understand that we are all His children. Sins will cease as soon as we realise our relationship with God. God is always impatient to save souls, like a hungry man is impatient to wait for a fully cooked food. God is the first guru seated in the hearts of all. The dust of the feet of God's holy saints is effacious in healing god-sick souls. To be a liege to God's saints is of greater virtue and value than allègiance to God Himself direct. God with us is success. His presence is strength and absence weakness. By knowing and following the path shown by the Alvars and by constant contemplation on their lives and teachings, one can chalk out an ideal pattern of life on earth and what is more one can find one's way to heavenly bliss or liberation hereafter. It is therefore the paramount duty of all to study the lives of such holy personages and to drink the elixir for the attainment of the ultimate goal in life.

The Alvars are "sustainers of society". Their lives are revelations of divine grace. They have a transforming effect. They had "trikala drsti, an intuition of time in which past, present and future exist together for ever in the self-knowledge and self-power of the Eternal". The late swami Sivananda of the Himalayas has remarked : "A study of the lives and sayings of the saints will inspire anyone and awaken the spiritual consciousness in him. By remembering their names, one can lift himself to a very high level of mental evolution. By treading their paths one can enjoy freedom from wants, freedom from pains and sorrow".

◆

The First Three Alwars

(Poygai, Bhutam and Pey Alvars)

The Tamil month of Aipasi (October to November) is an important month as the month of Margali (December to January).The consecutive days represented by the asterisms, Sravana, Sravishta and sathabhishak in this month are memorable ones, as these are the days hallowed by the appearance on earth of Pogaialvar, Bhutatalvar, Peyalvar respectively. These three ālvars are popularly called the Mudal or First Alvars as they were born before the other Vishnavaite saints to drive out darkness of ignorance,redeem and rescue mankind from their lethargy. The three alvars are considered to be the incarnations of Vishnu's Panchajanya (conch), Kaumodaki (club) and Nandaka (sword) respectively.

The conch is very dear to Him because its very sight fills Him with feelings that He is the chastiser of the wicked and that He is the greatest friend of the good and the helpless. The club and the sword are also considered to possess the powers of annihilating evil - doers and protecting the helpless. The Alvars who are divine incarnations are considered to possess supernatural and divine attributes.

The trio who were born at Kancheepuram, Mahabalipuram and Mylapore respectively had their origin in flowers. Not even the semblance of a woman is connected with their birth. If God can create out of nothing, He can no doubt create saints out of flowers. No wonder, therefore, the three holy commissioners were sent to ' perfume the mundane atmosphere.'

Being made of **suddha-sattva** nature,they were spotlessly free from Rajasa and Tamasa gunas. Their sattvic nature enabled them to gain a right comprehension of things. They engaged themselves in attaining knowledge of God or **jnana**, **bhakti** or love and vairagya or dispassion which constitute spirituality. Mentally God-absorbed and emotionally God-enamoured, the holy trio needed neither food nor water. All their manna was God and all their senses revelled in seeing, feeling, scenting and tasting Him. They grew only in the milk of grace of God.

The Lord of Love desired world redemption through them by bringing them together and revealing His saving grace. Once in the course of their pilgrimage to shrines and enjoyment of archa forms of the Lord, they all met at Tirukoilur in South Arcot District in a narrow place where the three could just stand. It was a dark night. Besides, it was raining cats and dogs. The three spent their time in delightful conversation on God, His divine forms. narrating to each other thei. mystic experiences and were lost in the trance of **bhakti** Suddenly, in the darkness they felt on their person the pressure of an unknown stranger in their midst.

Each was at a loss to account for the strange intrusion Suddenly, it occurred to Poigaialvar that the darkness should be dispelled first so that the mystery might be unravelled. He lit the lamp with the aid of his poetic and mystic powers with the earth as bowl, the sea as ghee and the shining sun. for the **jyotis** or flame. Bhutatalvar with a song lit the lamp of jnana or wisdom with **bhakti** as ghee, love as bowl, and mind as wick.

As a result of the illumination generated by both the lights, the God-intoxicated Peyalvar was blessed with a direct vision of the effulgent form of the Lord and His consort and was mad with love and burst out with his hymn:

> " I have seen Thiru Divine consort by the side of
>
> I have seen His glorious golden effulgene, bright as burning sun,
>
> I have seen His golden disc irressitible in war,
>
> I have seen the conch that wins the love of its beholders".

The other two Alvars also enjoyed the beautific vision and were deluged in its glory. The Lord, the enchanter of the hearts of the yogis suddenly vanished. The divine arrival occasioned the outpouring of the mystic thoughts and the singing of a centum of Tamil verses by each, known as First, Second and Third Tiruvandadis which form part of the **Nalavira Divya Prabandham.**

In these three poems, the saints glorify God as the Inner self and saviour of all beings. By controlling the mind and the senses, they say, He can be intuited with the inner eye. In His infinite love, He assumes the name and form which the devotee desires and reveals Himself in the Same form. He may be worshipped in any manner.

According to Ramanuja, there are three distinct stages in the progress of devotion or love viz **Para bhakti, para jnana and parama** bhakti. The para bhakti is the longing of the devotee to have a direct Vision of God for ever. The achievement of that vision of God is para jnana and the desire to have the experience of that vision perpetually is parama bhakti. It is considered that these three stages of God-love are realisable in their fullest extent only in heaven. But by His grace, the saints realised them even while tarrying on earth. This also confirms the truth of the mantra in the Kathopanishad that the Supreme Self is attained by him whom he may select and to whom he may reveal His essence.

Tirukoilur has attained greater prominence and popularity out of 108 places of pilgrimage not only as a place where the above memorable event took place but also as one which gave birth to the prabandham and witnessed the inauguration ceremony in the very immediate presence of the Lord and His consort, as Valmiki Ramayana was expounded by the twins Lava and Kusa in the presence of Sri Rama and the Vishnu Sahasranama Stotra was delivered by Bhishma before Sri Krishna Himself. The prabandham is, therefore, as sacred and authoritative as Vedas. Itihasas etc and expounds the vedic truths in the charming language Tamil familiar to all castes and creeds. This sacred literature is often spoken of as ubhaya vedanta i.e., as double vedanta consisting of the Sanskrit Vedanta and the Tamil poetic Vedanta. To communerate this event Vedanta Desika has composed a stotra called "Dehaleesa Streti".

The very first verse in the poem of Peyalvar cited above points to the Isvara-Isvari relation of God–hood, which is a dual-nondual relation. Isvara rules by law and Isvari rules by love and the two are glued together as one. It is Divine motherhood that is the operative grace of God which consists in forgiveness and redemption of the sinner from his wicked ways. The mother's love is spontaneous and the Divine Mother forgives sins by Her over-flowing love. This is a strikingly special feature of Vaishnavism and Saivaism.

The Guruparampara and other sources do not contain full particulars about the lives of these saints. After the event at Tirukoilur, the trio met Tirumalisai Alavar alias Bhaktisara at Tiruvallikeni (now Tiriplicane) and from there ali repaired to Mayila, (Mylapore), the birth – place of Peyalvar and from which place they dispersed. The three attained the Lord's Feet having lived for very many years and fulfilled their mission on earth as His elects.

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Tirumalisai Alvar

(Bkaktisara)

Once upon a time, the Rishis went to Brahma to consult him as regards the best place on earth where they could make a short sojourn for the purpose of carrying on their meditation. After carefully weighing the merits of various places, Brahma prescribed that Mahisarapura (Tirumalisai) would suit them.This village lies about 16 miles from Madras and 2 miles from Poonamallee.'Malisai 'comes from Mahisara and 'Tiru' indicates the sacredness of the place. Accordingly all the Rishis repaired to Tirumalisai.

At Mahisarapura Tirumalisaipiran was born to Bhargava Rishi in the month of Thai (January - February) under the influence of asterism.Makha as a manifestation of the discus or **Sudarsana** of Vishnu. The birth of the child is considered to be a supernatural one as he was born in the twelth month of pregnancy as Rama, son of Dasaratha.

Born as he was without any limbs or developed body he was left in the forest bordering Tirumalisai in a bamboo bush.To perpetuate the importance and sacredness of the spot, a **mandapa** has been erected over it and the annual festival of the saint takes place here. By the grace of the Almighty,the baby began to grow and cry.

The baby was picked up by one Tiruvalan belonging to a low caste. Being childless, he was immensely pleased to bring up the foundling as his own child. It was fed upon the milk supplied **gratis** by a pious cowherd, to whom also some time later, a boy was born. This child was called Kanikanna and he became an ardent disciple of Tirumalaipiran. As Krishna was brought by Nanda in Gokulam, Tirumalsaipiran was brought up by Tiruvalan.

As he grew in years, he began to examine critically the various **darsanas** (systems of philosophy) which were then prevalent at the time to find out the real truth of them. This was comparatively an easy task for him apparently due to the prescience of his former birth and due to the fact that he was a born mystic. After varied experiments in Buddhism, Jainism. Saivism, and other systems he was initiated into Vaishnavism by Peyalwar, a very great saint with whom he came into contact at Triplicane and who is recognised to be his guru. He equipped himself with a comprehensive knowledge of Narayana. Traditional accounts also indicate that Siva who was so much impressed by the intense fervour of his bhakti conferred on him the title of Bhaktisara.

As a true contemplative, Bhaktisara immersed himself in intense yoga. His mind was fixed on Narayana alone as his thoughts rested in Him. Being in constant fellows hip with God he was a man of God. His soul came to abide permanently in the temple of God. In moments when he was not engaged in yoga, his only preoccupation was to pluck flowers and **tulasi** leaves and offer fascinating garlas made out of them to the Lord. In short, he spent his end life as a **Nitya-yukta** or **Satata-yukta** to use the terminology of Yogeswara Krishna in the Bhagavad Gita.

To Bhaktisara, the archa image as static God became a dynamic deity of daya or grace. He went on pilgrimage to Kancheepuram with his disciple Kanikannan after remaining for some years at Tirumalisai. The reigning Pallava Prince of Kancheepuram having heard of the spiritual greatness of the Alvar, appealed to him through his disciple to grant him the boon of eternal youth. As Kanikannan pointed out that his request could not be complied with he was requested to sing at least a song in praise of the prince. As this request was not also complied with,Kanikannan was directed to quit Kancheepuram forthwith. Kanikannan disclosed everything to Bhaktisara. Bhaktisara greatly annoyed by the importunity of the prince addressed the Lord of the temple thus: "Kanikannan is going. O Lord: you shall not stay here. I am also leaving. Please roll up your serpent couch." Saying this, the saint with Kanikannan left the capital at once for an adjacent village named Orrukkai or Oriravirukkai whither the Lord of the temple also went.

Intense gloom prevailed over the capital. When the report of the absence of the image of the temple reached the Prince, he learnt that the calamity was due to the offence he had done to the saint. Thereupon he apologised to the saint and succeeded in bringing back to his capital both the image and the saint. On account of this incident, and His acting in obedience to the behest of the saint, the Lord of the temple came to be known as Yathoktakari which name signified acting as directed by others. A festival is also celebrated every year in the month of Thai (January–Feburary) to commemorate this event.

After a short stay in the Pallava Capital, the saint started on a pilgrimage to Kumbakonam, where he spent the rest of his life. While worshipping God in the sarangapani temple, he saint addressed Him thus: Are your legs giving pain on account of your walking as Rama **avatara**? Or, has your body been shaken too much while lifting mother earth as Varaha **avatara**? What is the object of your lying and resting in Kudandai (Kumbakonam) on the banks of the Cauvery? Please rise and answer'. Instantaneously, the Lord lifted up his head to answer the saint's queries. Deeply moved by the grace and **Soulabya** quality of the Lord, the saint uttered words by way of **mangalasana** or benediction to the Lord; 'May you live long and undisturbed'. The Lord of the temple is even this day seen as **Uttanasayee** i.e. as lying down with his head slightly raised.

The **Divya suri charitam** and **Guruparampara** record also similar outstanding events in the life of the mystic saint. At Perumbuliyar, near Tiruvaiyar in Tanjore district, the saint was not allowed to enter the temple. But as he was going round the temple, the Lord was seen to revolve in His place looking in the direction of the saint.

The saint has left behind him two works of outstanding merits. - – one **Nanmugan Tiruvandadi** of 96 verses and the other **Tiruchanda** Viruttam of 120 verses. In the former, he expatiates on the greatness and glory of Narayana. He has also asserted therein that all the knowledge acquired by him was based on inquiry and actual experience.

The latter work is full of rhythm and melody In many verses, numericals have been strung together so as to produce symphony. He has chronicled his mystic experiences of the enjoyment of the Divinity and the attainment of eternal bliss. He has referred to the bond of his love to God thus: 'O Narayana' I am not without Thee nor art Thou without me. 'He implores the Lord to so ordain his mind that he may remember Him always and chant His name. He also points out them God's grace is unlimited and unfailing and that even the humblest and the most unworthy may build up his spiritual progress.

Like the rishis he realised the Divine peace. The following may be considered as his eternal message to the **bhaktas**:

"The Divine is the unique one. Salvation comes by His grace. He is the sole refuge to the mortals. He is everywhere He resides in the heart of all beings. His grace is invincible, Nothing can equal Him. His love is the most valuable theasure to man. He is Bliss. The heart should ceaselessly love him and be conscious of Him in everything. He is the meaning of the Vedas. He is the only one that deserves to be extolled and adored. He is the knowledge, the knower and the known." According to traditional account, he lived for 4200 years. The yoga of Bhaktisara embraces the whole of spiritual life. His divine experiences were of immanental type. He has also displayed the potency and efficacy of archa images in temples.

◆

NAMMALVAR. (Sathakopa Muni)

There lived at Kurugur alias Alvar Tirunagari in Tirunelveli district on the banks of the river Tampraparani one Kariar, a vellala by caste. His ancestors were all ardent worshippers of Vishnu. He was married while young to Udaiyanagaiyer of the village of Tiruvanparisaram lying in Kanyakumari District. The happiness of the couple having been marred by the absence of a child, they went to Tirukurangudy in the of district of Tirunelveli, where they offered worship and begged to be blessed with a son. The Lord of the local temple revealed to them that he himself was going to take birth as their son.

Ere long Udayanagaiyar gave birth to a son. The child was unlike any other infant in his wordly ways. He would neither take mother's milk nor cry but preserved a health and freshness that appeared extraordinary. The parents who named the child Maran apparently on account of the above peculiar characteristics, were unable to account for this extraordinary phenomenon. They took the child to the old Tamarind tree within the precincts of the local temple and left him under its shade in a cradle.

Such is the story of the childhood of Nammalvar He was born under the asterism of Visakham in the month of Vaikasi. (May to June). Vara Vara Muni alias Manavala Mamunigal in his **Upadesa Ratnamala** has considered Nammalvar as the greatest of the Alvars and that there is no other day to match the day of birth of the saint and no work to match his 'Tiruvoimoli'. the Tamil Veda. It is considered to be an incarnation of Vishvaksena, in commander-in-chief of Vishnu. Its birth is foretold in Bhagavata, Bhavishyat, Parana, Markandeya and other Puranas.

Sixteen years elapsed. Still the boy was seated in the same place in deep samadhi, silent and motionless and entirely oblivious of the world around him. At this time, Madurakavi who hailed from Tirukovalur near Tirukurugur was on a pilgrimage to the shrines in the north. One night, he saw proceeding as it were from the south an immense blaze of light. It was a mystery to Him. Having determined to find out the truth, he went on travelling during nights guided by the light, resting himself during day time. At length, he came to the foot of the Tamarind tree where Nammalvar was seated.

Madaurakavi saw Nammalvar sitting in Padmasana in deepest contemplation, his eyes closed,his body erect and motionless.He stood speechless before him wrapt in wonder and awe. To solve the riddle he dropped a slab of stone in front of the Alvar, causing a loud noise, which made the saint open his eyes. Madurakavi tried another experiment and put the question'If within a dead thing,a small thing were to take birth what would the latter eat or where would it lie? This means that if within inanimate matter,the subtle soul or jiva were to take birth, what would it feed on and where it would rest ? Maran replied that 'the small thing will feed on it and rest therein' meaning 'The subtle soul encased in matter or prakriti will feed on it and rest in it'. Struck with wonder and awe Madhurakavi immediately fell at his feet and acknowledged him as his guru. He chose to remain by his side and attain divine wisdom at his feet. Thereafter he was ever the shield and show of Nammalvar.

At about this time, The Lord graciously blessed Nammalvar with a sight of His presence. After the realisation of God,Nammalvar began to expound the Lord's greatness. The age had become degenerate. Sanskrit was no longer the language of the literary and the sacred classes.As he wanted to throw open the doors of wisdom to all and sundry, he composed his works in Tamil **'Tiruviruttam'**,**'Tiruvasiriyan'** and **' Periya Tiruvandadi'** are considered to be the embodiment of Rig, Yajur and Atharvana vedas respectively. **' Tiruvoimoli '** which is his **magnum opus** and the best and most popular of his works is considered an epitome of the grand and sacred truths echoed in the Sama veda.

Nammalvar has sung about deities of 33 shrines. Leaving the few shrines of the Chola Kingdom and Tirupati lying farther north, the places to which songs are addressed are those lying near his own native place in the Pandya country and a number of places on the other side of the Ghats. Whether the addressing of the poems to the deities in the various shrines meant that the saint actually visited them is not definitely known. The traditional accounts are silent on this point.But from a close and intelligent reading of the poems one cannot but come to the conclusion that the Alvar must have visited them as is seen from the everwith descriptions given about them.According to the traditional account, he lived only for 35 years.

"Tiruvoimoli" can be rendered as the'word of mouth.'The expression has significance for which there is a classical literary authority.That is the Veda for the reason that it originally emanated by word of mouth from Vishnu,and Brahma received the inspiration. Nammalvar himself says that his songs were sung by the Lord Himself through him as both the poet and poetry. This consists of 1102 stanzas and is called **Dramidopanishad or Bhagavad Vishaya.**

Elaborate commentaries have been written are known as the 'Six thousand', 'the twelve thousand',The 'twentyfour thousand'and'The thritysix thousand'or 'Edu',One of the later commentaries is called 'Acharya Hrdayam'. Vedanta Desika has established the importance of the Alvar's work and has characterised it as the Empress (Sarvabhoumi) of religious literature.Desika's works on Tiruvoimoli are'Dramidopanishad Saram'and 'Dramidopanishad-Tatparya Ratnavali',which are a ' rich storehouse of beautiful poetry, sublime philosophy and intense devotion'.

The outpourings of the Alvar in his hymns contain the essence of Sattvic devotion culiminating in paramabhakti or supreme devotion To him, God was not merely the author of existence, but an intimate personal friend and guide. His conclusions reveal his visions and their truth. His darsana of God is perceptual, pholosophic and intuitive'.

The core of his faith is in the following stanza of his :

"The indwelling God is in all created beings ;
and all the religions professed by man,
It is vain to reach Him through the senses,
And He defies mere intellectual understanding ;
Seek Him in the soul's sanctuary, the source of all life
In firm meditation but free from disturbing mundane thoughts,
And the Lord can be served for ever".

Tiruvoimoli deals with five matters called **Artha Panchaka** They are 1) Lord 2) the individual soul 3) the means 4) the end and 5) that which is opposed to the attainment of the end. It also expounds the importance of the Ashtakshara mantra–**Om Namo Narayanaya.**

Nammalvar was the first to expound the'**sarira-sariri bhava** viz. that body and soul form the sarira of God. He is the Being of beings the Light of lights and the Love of all loves. He is accessible to all in His incarnational forms. The chief means of attaining Him is by self - renouncement, rooting out egoism, selfgift to the Self and **prapatti** or self-surrender. He is the food, drink and delight of the self. When the individual surrenders himself to God, He overwhelms him with his grace, purifies him and removes all the obstacles that stand in the way and gives him **moksha.**

Parasara Bhatta a distinguished desciple of Ramanuja has described the Alvar as a personification of **Krishna Trishna Tattva** i.e.the embodiment of the feeling of thirst for Krishna. No other **avatara** has exercised so much fascination as Krishna,and he went in trance twice or thirce.He has adopted **Nayaka-Nayika** Bhava in describing his love for Krishna. The Alvar Nayika is blessed with the beautiful vision of the Nayaka beloved. He is immersed in the sea of delight and filled with rapture.The joy of union or **samslesha** exceeds all hedonistic joys even of **swarga**. The Alvar self enjoys the Supreme self as **Aravamuda** nectar limitless. The Mayan or enchanter begins to play the game of 'hide and seek'– with a view to purify the mind and increase the intensity of his love. The **samslesha** (union) is followed by **vislesha** (separation). The colour and glow of life of the bride with its grace fade away. The body loses its weight and becomes a dead weight. She spends sleepless days and nights. She sighs,sobs, weeps and wails,groans and cries in utter anguish, She is over-powered by the sense worthiness and sinfulness which ends in remorse and prayer for forgiveness.The bridegroom appears before the bride and on account of the union the bride is lost in ecstasy. The Mayan suddenly disappears, The distress due to **vislesha** deepens into depression bordering on despondency. She sends messages through birds, wind, cloud etc. Her mother feels very much for her daughter. She has lost her colour and glow. The mood of the bride changes from despondency to defiance. She takes the offensive and resorts to **madal**. She gives up modesty and fear of public opinion and openly denounces the Nayaka for his cruel desertion. But her feminine love reasserts itself and the mood changes from reprisal to remorse, and longing for reunion. The Nayaka cannot allow his Nayaki to suffer any longer.He appears before her and the two are united together.

The bridal mysticism of Nammalvar provides also a basis for a true philosophy of religion. The authority for the mystic faith is enshrined in the teachings of the Upanishads – "He who knows Brahman attains the Highest", By knowing Brahman everything is known and all doubts are dissolved, all evil disappears and all misery is destroyed. The Vedantic view of Brahman as **Satyam** (truth), **Anandam** (bliss) and **Sundaram** (beauty) is more relevant to mysticism than the ideas of God as thought or will. The mysticism of Nammalvari s an admirable blend of divine knowledge and consummation of religious experiences. God is love and He becomes man in order that man may become God.

Nammalvar not only enjoyed the glory of God himself but also invited others to share his joy and bliss. This was the highest social and spiritual service rendered by him to the jivas. Seeking God and seeing Him is the highest good of life and all other good follows from it. Further, God gives Himself to the Mahatma who regards Him as his very self.

The Alvar was full of compassion for the whole world, which is commensurate only with his love to God. His appeals to God and to mankind are thrilling and indicate a broad vision of life. He points out the vanity and emptiness of human life and the greatness and glory of God and the the permanent fruits obtainable on account of God love.

God alone deserves to be praised. The practice of approaching wealthy people and praising them if they do not deserve the least praise is deprecated by him. He sings : 'On my dear poets : of what good are the riches got by singing about men. How long would they last ? If you sing of the father of the Devas, His crown radiating splendour on all sides, He will take you into His service. He will make you as Himself and put an end to your births !"Those who had the sole powers of ruling the world and did not serve God in the same birth, go begging from country to country with a broken pot in their hand worried by dogs. You had better meditate on His Holy feet and attain salvation. "The happiness of the people in this world are just like bubbles of water. They burst and disappear in a very short time. We do not observe even a single person continuing in world happiness up to the end. If you want to be unshaken, become the humble servants of Him lying on the couch of the deep and broad ocean. He is the Lord''. There are many verses in which he has made passionate appeals to the Lord to render succour to the mankind and help them to cross the **Samsaric** ocean.

In many places, he has made references to his humility, Such expressions are not merely conventional but are characteristic of his deep and real consciousness of his unworthiness with references to the greatness and glory of God. Verses such as the following full of intense longing for His Grance and love are the most distinct and valuable contribution to Tamil mystic and religious poetry.

"Small though I be and devoid of virtue though
my sins be great,

When, ever and anon, do cry on Thee with hands
joined on my head,
And call thee,'O swallower of the Earth'.
O image of knowledge divine, O Narayana
Thou comest not so that my eyes may behold
Thy beauty nor takest me to Thyself".

Among the numerous poems descriptive of God - head, the following one is worth quoting :

" Shall I call Him the Great Praiseworthy one ?
Shall I call Him the Peerless earth ?
Shall I call Him the bright ocean ? Shall I
call Him the fire, the wind ?
Shall I call Him the Spreading sky ?
Shall I call Him the shining bodies two ?
Shall I call Him this all ? How shall I
Describe Him the beautiful – eyed ? "

In his **Tiruviruttam,** he prays for release of **Samsaric** bonds, so that he may join Him and devote himself eternally to the service of the Lord. In **Tiruvasiriam,** he enjoys the vibhutis of the Lord with great joy and bliss. In **"Periya Tiruvandadi"**, He enjoys with overflowing delight and **ananda** the forms and attributes of the Lord.

No greater tribute can be paid to Nammalvar's greatness as a poet than of Kamban, the great Tamil poet and gifted composer of Ramayana paid by him at Sri Ranganatha's temple before an august gathering of Tamil poets.

"Can a world of poems equal one word of the
thousand hymns sung by Nammalvar ?
Is a fly to vaunt itsalf before a golden eagle ?
Is a fire–fly to twinkle its light before the sun-light ?
Is a dog to roar at a tiger ? Is a fox to shout
before a lion ?
Is a devil to dance as a rival to Urvasi ?
Is an ordinary poet to challenge comparison
with Nammalvar ?"

Nammalvar is the"very heart of Visishtadvaitic mysticism and is described symbolically as the soul of which the first three Alvars are the mind and the other alwars, the body".

The different names given to Nammalvar themselves indicate his spiritual glory. His life had so little in commons with that the rest of the world that he was called Maran. As an infant,Nammalvar defied the power of the psychic current Satha and hence the name Sathakopa.The Lord favoured him above all Alvars and called him 'Nammalvar'or'our Alvar'.The Lord Adinatha,the presiding deity of the Alvartirunagari temple presented him with a garland of Vakula.This accounts for the name Vakulabharana. Another name was Parankusa the iron goad.He got the name by controlling the wild elephants of other systems of philosophy.

The seeds of divine wisdom thrown by Nammalvar in his hymns had grown into the mighty system promulgated by Ramanuja. Dr. S. Radhakrishan has observed in his Indian Philosophy thus : His (Ramanuja's) study of the Alvars and his training by the acharyas helped to develop elements which otherwise would have remained latent in the Upanishads and Brahma Sutras. He did not for a moment feel that he was preparing a system of his own, he was but expounding the wisdom of the wise of all times".

Great saints like Nammalvar are therefore a clear testimony of the dignity of India as a nation with a soul. The teachings of saints which constitute a valuable heritage is the food which we have to consume in our onward march. There will be no greater and more suitable homage to saints than this.

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MADURAKAVI ALVAR

The very name of Madurakavi will remind one of honoured place given to Acharya Bhakti in Sri Vaishnavism, Service to **Guru** is considered more important than service to the Lord, as the acharya or guru is essentially interested in saving the disciple whereas the Lord is both a severe judge and saviour.

The Kathopnishad states that the wisdom concerning a soul cannot be obtained by the mere exercise of reason and that only when it is imparted by a guru, the soul will attain **moksha**. The Chandogya Upanishad states : 'It is only the Vidya or wisdom learnt from an acharya that gives proficiency'. Real knowledge can be had only from supreme devotion to the Guru. Madhurakavi has become famous as Alvar as he has established the Guru-sishya tradition as a prominent and essential feature in the attainment of salvation. The name Madhurakavi also indicates that he was a singer of sweet songs.

Madhurakavi was born under the influence of asterism of Sithirai in the month of Chitrai, (Mesha) in a Brahmin family of Sama Veda clan in Tirukolur near Alvartirungari in Tirunelveli district. As a befitted member of his community, he mastered all the vedas and the sciences. He is considered according to tradition a manifestion of Garuda, the king of birds.

On attaining manhood, he started on a pilgrimage to the sacred places in north India, Ayodhya and others. One night he saw , proceeding as it were from the south an immense blaze of light. It was a mystery to him. Having determined to find out the truth,he went on travelling during nights guided by the light, resting himself during day time. At length, he came to the foot of the Tamarind tree where Nammalvar was seated.

Madhurakavi saw Nammalvar sitting in Padmasana in deep contemplation, his eyes closed, his body erect and motionless. He stood speechless before the Alvar in wonder and awe. To solve the riddle he dropped a slab of stone in front of the Alvar causing loud noise, which made the saint open his eyes. Madhurakavi tried another experiement and put the question 'If within a dead thing. a small thing were to take birth, what would the latter eat or where would it lie ? This means that if within inanimate matter the subtle or jiva were to take birth, what would it feed on and where it would rest ? Maran replied that ' the small thing will feed on it and rest therein' meaning 'The subtle soul encased in matter or prakriti will feed on it and rest in it'. Struck with wonder and awe Madhurakavi immediately fell at his feet and acknowledged him as his guru. He chose to remain by his side and attain divine wisdom at his feet. Madhurakavi had thus found out his guru and the latter his disciple for whom he had been watiing so long.

Madhurakavi sings the glory of his master thus : 'I know no other God. I shall sing his glory. I am his devotee I laid my trust upon things of earth before. Ah vanity ! Realty is here ! I have found it today. I shall devote my entire life to hail his glory in all the eight directions of the world He has revealed to me the truth of the Vedas. To love his holy feet is my Sadhana ! To serve Sathakopa is my joy !

After the meeting of the Guru and the disciple, Nammalvar burst forth in song Madhurakavi carefully noted down the songs as they were sung, on palm – leaves and at some time later after the death of Nammalvar, published them for the edification of the world.

Madhurakvi stands out among the saints in having preached to mankind not the greatness of God but the greatness of God's elects – who are only the souls of God Himself. In elucidating it,he has sung **Kanninum Siruthambu**-a small poem containing only 11 verses, which is his only work. It is as short as it is sweet and teems with vedantic truths. A free translation of these eleven verses is given in the appendix.

Vedanta Desika has remarked : 'To those who venture to obtain release from the bondage of Samsara, the ancient path indicated to us by Madhurakavi is the only safe path". The safe path is Bhakti and Prapatti to acharya. In the first five verses of his poem, Madurakavi states how he approached and attained Nammalvar's feet and in the remaining stanzas how the Acharya functions to secure to the disciple the saving grace of the Lord.The chief function of an acharya consists in correcting the disiple to make him a true vassal of God

Madurakavi lived for several years perpetuating the memory of his master by construction of temples.installation of a rcha images therein,expounding the works of his master and establishing their greatness and glory.

Madurakavi looked upon Nammalvar in the same way as Nammalvar looked upon God. Madhurakavi says that he is sure to enjoy the divine glories by serving Nammalvar, and the acharya can redeem the soul of the disciple from samsara by his unbounded kripa or grace.

Madurakavi is held in geat revernce as also his work of **Kanninum. Siruthambu.**It is one of the prabandhams that go to make up the Nalayira Divya Prabandham. It is treated as Pranava to Nammalvar's Tiruvaissamoli the Tamil Veda and is recited accordingly in all Vaishnaviate temples before Tiruvoimoli.

Vaishnavism is known for its catholicity of outlook.Nammalvar was Vellala by caste and Madurakavi a Brahmin.The fact that Madhurakavi has acknowledged Nammalvar as his guru clearly indicates that distincitions of caste etc.are not given any importance and all are equal in the eyes of the Lord and that Bhakti or intense devotion is the only criterion.

The Acharyas are revealers of the Reality, which is all Bliss. They do not keep their experiences or discoveries to themselves. They had thus attained social significance.Association with them besides obtaining divine wisdom produces detachment from fruits of action. Such detachment leads to desirelessness and from desirelessness arises stability of mind which makes way for the attainment of liberation.

The Upanishads ask the aspirant for spiritual glory to approach with fuel in hand a teacher well versed in the vedas and 'sastras'. He has the foundation in God. His very presence radiates peace and joy,He refashions the souls of those who look to him for help. He works for the fulfilment of the Divine in the world, for the good of all beings and for the fulfilment of the Divine purpose. Such is the greatness of an Acharya.

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Kulasekhara Alvar

The Royal Saint of Kerala

The asterism Punarpus (Punarvasu) of the Month of Masi (Kumbha) (February to March) is another glorious day in every Tamil Year. This is the day on which Kulasekhara Alvar was born in the city of Kolli in Malabar district. He was a rajarishi like king Janaka. He was born under the same auspicious star as that under which Sri Rama was born. According to orthodox belief he is considered to be the incarnation of Kaustabha, the jewel indicating the identity of Vishnu's breast.

Like Rama, he came of a pure and ancient family of noble kings – the Chera rulers of Travancore. Kulasekhara's father was king Dridhararta. He was for long childless like king Dasaratha and only after severe penances and incessant prayers to Lord Narayana, Kulashekara was born.

Even as a young prince Kulasekhara was taught all the arts of war and peace. He was initiated in the Vedas and Sastras. What is more, seeds of devout devotion were sown in him and they were to take deep root and in later year bear the rich fruit of an over – powering saintlessness, which has been a source of inspiration to the humanity at large. Consequently he was free from Tamasic and Rajasic gunas commonly characteristic of royal families and was full of satvic qualities which stood him in great stead.

As soon as he came of age and was deemed fit to rule the kingdom, Kulasekhara's father installed him in the throne and him self returned into the forest as was usual with the kings of olden days, to devote the evening of his life in divine meditation.

Kulasekhara soon became a strong and sagacious ruler. His conquests were very many. He was not only the king of the Cheras, but was soon acclaimed the king of the Cholas and Pandyas as well. This is evident from the epithets used by him about himself in his works. He ruled his kingdom well and all his subjects felt as happy as those blessed citizens of Ayodhya are reputed to have been under the divine rule of Rama.

But he found the people around him too much addicted to self-betterment, and his nature revolted against his living among such ungodly people. He felt that he was living amidst heaps of fire and that he should fly away from his riches and friends as did Vibhishena, brother of Ravana to the lotus feet of Rama, which are the ultimate refuge of all souls. He would exclaim :

" What makes me the king is not the crown :
which men set on my head ;
But king when King of Kings doth make
His lotus-feet my crown."

He wanted to leave his kingdom and go to Srirangam where as one among the devotees he could spend the rest of his days in ecstatic contemplation of the Holy incarnate. At times he would feel an inclination to go to Tirupati where

"as herb or worm or stone or dust,
It is privilege high there so to well".

Sometimes he used to be sezied with the desire to visit each vaishnavaite shrine, to live at each place and to enjoy the beauty of each archa image immensely.

Thus love of God and contempt for the world soon gained ground over his heart. He spent his leisure time in reading Puranas, Vedas, Upapuranas and composing songs in Sanskrit such as Mukundamala or the 'Garland for Mukunda God', and in reading and listening to the discourses on Valmiki Ramayana. His court was packed with sages and devotees.

One day when Ramayana was being recited as usual-there came the passage emotionally read out by the,purohit, Narayana Sarma :

"There twice seven thousand giants stand with
impious heart and cruel hand, Here Rama
stands, by virtue known, How can the
hero fight alone ?"

This roused the feelings of Kulasekhara and he rose immediately from his seat and quite oblivious of the surroundings he ordered his army to march out instantly on Rama's rescue. The priest adopted a plan to avert the situation, skipped over a few passages of the epic and atonce read out in vociferous tone so as to drown everything else :

"When Sita looked upon her Lord,
His foemen slain, the saints restored,
In pride and rapture uncontrolled,
She clasped Him in her loving hold".

The king's anxiety was atonce set at rest and his joy knew no bounds. Thenceforward, the Puruohit exercised very great discretion in reading Ramayana to the king so as to avert similar situations. Such was the intensity of the King's devotion and his quick response to spiritual emotions.

The ministers of the king found it difficult to carry on the administration with the king on account of his intense devotion to God. They laid the blame for the king's transformation at the door of the Vaishnava devotees-the devotees whom the king revered and in whose company he spent the best of his time.They deemed it best to wean away the king from the association of the Vaishnava devotees. The king was also making preparations himself to leave the capital and to go and live in Srirangam amidst the devotees of Lord Ranganatha. He felt that his was the role of a servant to Lord Ranganatha

The ministers hit upon a plan. They decided to belittle the importance of Vaishnava devotees by blackening their character and integrity. One morning a valuable jewel of the palace deity of Rama was missing and a report was made to the king that one of the Vaishnavas had stolen it. The king would not believe the charge. He understood the mischief of the ministers and declared that no lover of God could even think of an offence like stealing not to speak of his committing the act. He ordered a venomous snake to be put into pot and brought before him, and he thrust his hand into the pot saying that if the Vaishnava devotees were pure and innocent, he would meet with no harm. The snake crouched in fear and was powerless to bite. The ministers were put to shame. They atonce made a clean breast of the whole affair to the king who pardoned them.

The king immediately abdicated his throne in in favour of his son and came to live in Srirangam. There he enjoyed the sweet pleasures of religious studies and sung the praises of the Lord. There it was that he produced Perumal Tirumozhi in Tamil for the edification of all people devoted to God. He also went on pilgrimage to many of the holy shrines in the country and enjoyed the divine forms of the Lord. He lived to the age of sixty seven and spent his last days in Mannarkoil doing service there to Lord Rajagopalaswami.

The title of Kulasekhara Perumal was bestowed on him as he had to feel one with the Almighty in his devotion to him. What affected Him affects him most.

" Mukundamala" in Sanskrit and 'Perumal Tirumoli' in Tamil are the only works of the Alvar now extant. Some feel that Kulasekhara the author of ' Mukundamala '., is quite different from Kulasekhara Alvar of ' Perumal Tirumozhi'. while some other believe that it is one and the same person. The intensity of devotion and the felicity of expression in both the works will force one to the conclusion that they are both works of the same Kulasekhara. Dr. S. Krishnaswami Iyengar has remarked in this connection "another item of doubt is whether the author of the Sanskrit poem is the Alvar Kulasekhara. To those that compare the Tamil poem nd the Sanskrit sastra the scepticism would appear to have but little foundation in fact".

Kulasekhara like Janaka was a Karma Yogin. He discharged his functions as a king with a supreme sense of duty. But wealth and kingdom had no attraction for him. He would insistently pray for unremitting devotion to the Lord's feet

He has also taught the lesson that the activities of the work–a–day life and the necessary pursuit after wealth and Pleasures in lawful ways need not necessarily conflict with leading the highest spiritual life.One should consider that they all come by the gift of God to be taken and enjoyed for promoting happiness among His beings and the Bhaktas in particular. This indeed is the Empire of Divine service or Kinkarya Samrajya which is the summum bonum of every true devotee.

God is always our support and saviour. This holds good as much where He protects us as when he rejects us and torments us. The appeals of surrender made by the Alvar are illustrative of this sentiment :

"The angry mother pushes away the child ; yet the child cries remembering her love, mercy. So I am O Supreme ! Thou are reluctant to redress the ills of my life. Yet I cling to thy feet. I have no other refuge".

The husband insults her before the public. Yet the chaste wife clings to him and none else. Even so, though thou would'st not give me refuge, I shall extol thy feet their anklets jingle a promise of protection".

"The patient's love towards the doctor abates not though the latter cuts and scorches the wound. O Susreme ! Thy maya grieves gravely. I hold thy feet and look for thy grace".

The above sentiment had been expressed by Sita to Anusuya when she said that even if her husband, Rama had not been such a great and good person, but had been one who had abandoned good and upright conduct, still her love towards him would have been the same : The saint Alvandar has also expressed the same sentiment : "O God, though you may reject me, I have no inclination to relinuish your lotus feet ; even though pushed away by its angry mother, the suckling boy does not wish to leave its mother's feet". This is a notable doctrine of all systems of thought particularly of Vaishnavism.

As 'Mukndmala' embodies in essence the lessons taught in Upanishads, Puranas and Itihasas, it has been considered the most apt and highly authoritative form of prayer. The Alvar speaks of the name of Sri Krishna as the tonic for man's physical, mental and spiritual progress and advancement. He speaks of Dharma or duties which men should perform following in essence the teachings of Krishna to Arjuna in Bhagavad Gita. There will be salvation to those who devote themselves to the service of the servants of God, that man must soar above mundane things by devoting himself to the service of God and that man should engage himself in the four-fold duties of physical worship, worship with wordly materials, worship by invocation and prayers and worship by tapas and meditation.

'Perumal Tirumozhi' in Tamil consists of 105 stanzas, of which thirty have been devoted to Rama Avatara, twenty to Krishan Avatara, and the rest to Lord Ranganatha of Srirangam, Lord Srinivasa of Tirupati, and the God of Vithuvakkodu shrine in Malabar district. In ten verses, he sings a lullaby song to Rama. In the second ten verses he bemoans like Dasaratha Rama's departure to the Dandaka forest. In expressing his feelings, he may be considered to have excelled Dasaratha himself and in the third ten verses, he has given Samskshepa Ramayana. He has sung rapturous songs upon the love of the Gopis and the loveliness of Krishna.

His appeal to Lord Srinivasa of Tirupati is very emotional:

"Let me live up the Hill ; let me be a stream that waters thy groves fragrant with honey-dropping flowers. Let me at least, be a pillar of thy temple or let me be a champak in thy hill buzzing with the bees or O Venkatesh ! Let me be a fish in thy lake. Coral lipped Venkatesh ! I shall be some-thing upon your golden hill, a humble servitor at thy feet.

The Alvar has thought of a unique way of Kainkaraya or service to God and man. It was by self-effacement by being and becoming as it were a step at the sanctum sanctorum to behold his beauty and to be trodden by devotees. The step of the sanctum in every Vaishnavite temple is consequently called Kulasekharapadi. In Vaishnavism spiritualities and service go together and very often service is preferred to spiritual undertakings.

The life of the Alvar is a typical example of Dasya Bhakti. To him there was no greater delight and Ananda than to be with the assemblage of devotees and to serve them. According to tradition he lived for 67 years.

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PERIYALVAR

(Vishnuchitta)

The asterism of swati in the month of Ani (June – July) is a meritorious one on account of the birth of Vishnuchitta or Periyalvar at Srivilliputtur in Ramanathapuram district. The Word ‘ Periyalvar ’ clearly indicates that there must have been unique features about him. He attained this name on account of his overwhelming love for blessing God (mangalasasana) which is not so evident in the case other of Alvars. He was the father-in law of Lord Ranganatha his foster daughter, Anda or Goda having been married by Him. He belonged to a very orthodox Brahmin community. He is regarded as the incarnation of Garuda, the vehicle of Lord Vishnu.

His parents, Mukunda and Padma called him by the name of Vishnuchitta. The name itself indicates that he was one having Vishnu always in his mind. He was brought up with loving care and devotion. He had a beautiful garden where he grew flowers and Tulasi leaves and presented them to the deity Vada-patra-sayi of the local temple. He took very great pride and pleasure in this kainkarya. His heart overflowed with intense devotion and fervour.

He had perhaps no very great learning in the beginning of his life and was apparently endowed with learning and wisdom by the gift of God later.

At that time the Pandya country was ruled by Sri Vallabha Deva having his court at Madurai. When the king was reconnoitring the famous city at night, he saw a lonely stranger, a Brahmin pilgrim from Banaras to Rameswaram. He fell into a conversation with him. The Brahmin initiated the king in the Bhakti marga and took leave.

The next morning, the king, called his chif priest Chelva Nambi, a Vaishnava Brahmin and said "I have a strong aspiration for attaining God-realisation. Tell me how to attain His unbounded grace and bliss". The priest suggested the calling of a parliament of religions. Accordingly the king convened an assembly of learned men and set apart a prize consisting of a sum of money to be given to him whose knowledge and learning set out the highest truths. Vishnuchitta had at first no mind to attend the assembly but receiving in a dream in night a commission from the local Deity itself, he went, though not well-versed in the vedas and sastras and vedantic literarure, and took part in the conference. The God, Veda patrasayi filled his tongue with learning and eloquence. To his utter surprise, Vishnuchitta was hailed by the king and the learned as the chief of the learned and winner of the prize.

He answered directly all subtle questions of the scholars and maintained that Narayana is the Supreme Deity and that surrender to Him is the only way to bliss A miracle happened then. The money bag which was fixed in a high place broke loose and itself fell at the feet of Vishnuchitta. The king was quite convinced and was immsensely satisfied. Vishnuchitta was honoured with the title of Bhattarpiram or Pattarpiran in Tamil.

The king fell at the feet of the saint and recognised him as his Acharya, his spiritual preceptor. He organised procession in honour of Vishnuchitta through the streets of Madurai seated on an elephant. The Alvar was filled with divine ecstacy and ananda.

Suddenly the Alvar looked up and saw a beautiful vision in the sky. Soaring upon Garuda, His vehicle, Narayana with his Divine consort came on the scene to witness the festivity and the honour done to his devotee. The multitude following the Alvar cried "Om Namo Narayana". The Lord Himself heard with exceeding joy the Narayana mantra rising to the skies from the voice of the devotees.

The Alvar took the two bells hanging on both sides of the elephant used them as cymbals and keeping tune with them, sang a thrilling anthem. A great fear seized him that some evil eye might be cast on Him and His Beauty. With his vatsalya bhava, the Alvar blessed Him with long life and prosperity. This is Tiruppallandu, a thrilling hymn of 12 verses.

Tiruppallandu is given the foremost place in the collection of works of the Alvars. What pranava is to the Vedas, Pallandu is to the Prabhandham. Prabandham is always commenced with Tirupallandu and closed with it. This is also recited on the occasions of cermonies. An English translation of Tirupallandu is given in the Appendix.

In stanzas 1 and 2, the Alvar sings the praises of God. He is not happy to sing alone. He calls upon others who join with him to sing with him. In stanza 3, he calls on those who worship god, without any ulterior motive ; stanza 6 is their reply ; in stanza 4, he calls upon those who worship God with the object of securing soul realisation and who have gained it, forget God and content. Stanzas 7 and 10 give their response and the Alvar is singing with them. In stanza 5, he calls upon those who worship God seeking the enjoyment of worldly pleasure attached to impermanent wealth and power. Stanzas 8 and 11 are their response and the Alvar is singing with them. In stanza 12 he appeals to others who are altogether indifferent to God and suggests that for them the way to worship God is to join with him in singing this hymn and that the reward is unceasing worship.

Periyalvar Tirumoli is another work of the Alvar consisting of 461 verses. It is entirely devoted to Krishna and his lilas. Considering himself as Yasodha, the Alvar enjoys the glory of Krishna-and each verse is thrilling. This may be considered to be the Dasamaskanda in Bhagavata in Nalayira Divya Prabandham. The life of the Alvar is a typical example of Vatsalya Bhava. He attained Lord's great feet in his eighty fifth year.

Like every other Alvar, Periyalvar has his own message to be conveyed to the devotees :

"Poor are they that do not adore the Divine. They have caused unnecessary birth pangs to their mothers. They eat and drink sin that do not hail the name of God. Vain is their human birth, they strive that eat without taking Thy name".

"Woe unto them that do not utter the word of God before the call of death. The pious instal God Madhava in the temple of their heart and worship Him with blossoms of Love. They escape the noose of death. Call your sons and daughters Vishnu, Govinda, Narayana".

ANDAL

(OR GODA)

Andal was the only feminine mystic in the galaxy of Alvars. She was an ayonija and was found in the Tulasi Garden of Periyalvar as Sita was found by Janaka. She is considered to be an incarnation of Mother Earth. She was born under the asterism of puram in the month of Adi. (July – August). She grew up under the fostering care of her father.

As a child she helped her father in gathering flowers and preparing garlands for the Lord of the local temple at Srivilliputtur. As she grew old her love for God increased abundantly. She used to deck herself with the flowers and garlands intended to be offered to God. She would muse and see her beauty in a mirror. At times she would have misgivings as to whether she would be a suitable match to the Lord, who is Bhuvana Sundara or Beauty of Beauties.

Her father contributed his own share to develop her devotion. He performed for her the required ceremonies, initiated her into the secret doctrines of Vaishnavism and taught her to appreciate and value the greatness of Vishnu. He also imparted to her knowledge of the itihasas and puranas, and upapuranas.

One day Periyalvar observed her wearing flowers intended for God and felt sorely grieved at her childish and thoughtless act As he felt it was a great apachara or sin to offer used garlands to God, he withheld the dedication of flowers and garlands that day. God appeared in his dream and bade him continue the floral offerings as heretofore, and that the flowers used by her would only please Him.

Being an incarnation of mother earth,and by her contact, she imparted a rare and ethereal fragnance to the flowers and gralands, which they did not possess before. The Lord used to receive the garlands with avidity and attached very great attachment and importance to them. Vishnuchitta felt convinced that Andal was a divine gift and called her Andal (Protecting ruler). Andal became thenceforward the Lord's Chudikodutha Nachiar, a consort of His, who first wore the flowers and garlands and then presented them to Him. The father became Periyalvar by carrying to God the garlands worn by Andal.

As she grew old,her thirst for God increased abundantly. The thought of marrying God alone was always steadfast in her mind. Her dreams were centred on Him. The following is one such dream :

"Oh mate ! Give ear to my dream. Festive festoon fluttered and Narayana, whose betrothal was fixed for the morrow in a decorated pendal. Madhavan a cowherd with strong limbs entered. Indras and Devas were present. They made me His bride,His sister Durga was donned with yellow robes and decorated with garlands. Brahmins fetched sacred waters, sprinkled and blessed us. Krishna tied Kankanom on my wrist. Beautiful women waved lights. He is Lord of Mathura. Drums sounded, Conches blew. Madusudana came and held my hand went round the sacred fire.Lord Narayana with soft lotus like hands held my leg and placed it on the grinding stone. Shy I was. My brothers made me stand by Him closely, hand in hand. Fried rice was put into the fire, scented waters sprinkled on the roads. We went in procession. Thus did I dream" She would only listen to stories of Rama and Krishna which were insatiable nectar to her. Krishna exercised a magic spell on her. He became the object of her special love and affection. Her imagination took her back to the times when Krishna disported himself with the Gopis on the banks of Yamuna. She determined not to marry any mortal. The question of arranging for her marriage became a problem to Periyalvar.

But her dreams came true. Lord Ranganatha appeared in a vision to Periyalvar and allayed his feelings of anxiety and told him that He would himself marry Goda. To the temple priests of Srirangam there came the command from the Lord asking them to go to Srivilliputtur with the temple honour and bring Andal, the bride elect to him. Accompanied by priests and devotees and led by Periyalvar, Andal was taken in a palanguin to the Srirangam temple. As she entered the sanctorum and beheld the entrancing beauty of the Lord she was irrestibly drawn towards Him and was merged in His divine embrace. Andal became Sriranga Nachiar.

Periyalvar was filled with mixed feelings of joy and sorrow, joy at his daughter's union with Lord Himself and sorrow at his own separation from her. He was commanded by the voice of the Lord that he had now become His father - in - law and that he should go back to Srivilliputtur instal archa images of Himself and Andal and worship them with fervour and devotion and also to continue his usual kainkarya of dedicating garlands every day. The archa form of Rangamannar along with his consort are forms of exquisitive beauty available even now for enjoyment by the devotees. Andal is deified in all temples and her marriage with the Lord is celebrated with great pomp in all vaishnava temples in the month of Adi.

Tiruppavai and Nachiar Tirumoli containing 30 and 143 verses respectively are the prabandhams composed by Andal and are the quintessence of mystic love poured out spontaneously. They are unsurpassed in their moral and spiritual tone. They are considered as Goda Upanishad and contain all vedantic truths. They are as simple and homely, as they are sublime and philosophical.

Tiruppavai is sung daily in every Vaishnavaite shrine and is held in great veneration. It forms part of Nityanusandhanam in every temple. It is also a necessary prelude to the Nalayire Divya Prabandham. The recitation of the poem in the month of Margali is given the greatest prominence, one stanza per day in their order.

The scene and setting of Tiruppavai conform to archetype of Gopi's love to Krishna, who as Madana Mohana or Mayan captured their souls, and played the game of love on the banks of Yamuna. The performance of Katyayani vratam by the Gopis must have inspired Andal for her theme of Tiruppavai.

The first verse is reminiscent of the first sloka in the Gopika Geetam in Bhagavata. The girls proceed to the river singing the glories of God and, on their way, to the houses of some of their mates who had not yet joined and are found still sleeping. They call up the girls and all move on to the residence of Nanda Gopa and see the watchman at the gate. They appeal to him to permit them to enter in. They are accordingly permitted. They awaken the relations of Krishna, Nanda, Yeshoda, and others, beseech Krishna recounting his valour and glories. They offer their praises and pray to him to fulfil their request. They offer their love and worship and pray to him to maintain the bonds of their relationship by alluring them to do kainkarya eternally. They tell him that the object of their visit is not to obtain a 'parai' or drum to sound his glory, as originally told by them. Thus the poem, though a small one, is really a mystic quest to contact the beloved and do kainkarya to Him forever.

Krishna-love is also the theme of Tirumoli. Every word bespeaks love of Andal for the Lord whom she longs to wed. Her love increases to the maximum. There is no response to her irrepressible yearning and she sends messages to the cruel Lord through the cuckoo and the swan which have specialised in the art of mating to intercede on her behalf. But the message is not heeded and the feeling of forsakenness and frustration ends in the agony of despair. She rebukes her lover for his cunningness and cruelty. He is a thief as he has stolen away her heart and is elusive and deceptive. In her desperation she resorts to a unique expedient assault, which has no parallel in bridal mysticism. He is pierced by the shafts of love and can no longer remain quiet. He appears eventually before her and the two are glued together.

In Tiruppavai, Andal loves and realises the Lord who is All Beauty. All power and All love. It is at once the simplest story and the highest philosophy of Andal loving and realising her Lord. The science of the soul dealt with by the Vedantic thinkers is recreated by Andal through her mystical experiences artistically presented in Tiruppavai. The old message of the Upanishad and the Gita is heard anew in the Goda Upanishad.

Before she is offered to Him, she is a consort of Divinity. By the garland of verses which she has exquisitely woven and placed at His feet she has an unique place among the devotees. Her offerings are therefore (1) Poomalai to the Lord and (2) Pamalai to the devotees. To read and reflect on Andal's songs is the surest way of purging our minds of base and worldly thoughts and a certain receipe for union with God.

According to traditional belief Ramanuja used to recite Tiruppavai thrice a day. As she thus attached very great importance to this poem, He was called 'Tiruppavai Jeeyar'. Parasana Bhattar was so captivated by the charm of the poem that when he was suffering from a painful ailment, the chanting of Tiruppavai was the only recipe for his pain. In Goda Stutti Vedanta Desika emphasises the importance of Goda Upanishad and her place in the minds of the intellectuals like him.

The story of Andal refusing to marry any human being but persisting to marry the Lord has an important lesson to teach to the humanity. The human love if sufficiently dynamic is bound to lead to divine love. The human soul is but feminine in the presence of the Almighty Lord. Devotion, love and dedication are the stages in the path of attainment of the Lord. The real salvation lies only in utter dedication to Lord and the ecstatic atonement with Him. Narayana, the Lord is the giver of Good. We cannot attain him of our own accord. He must show his grace. By surrendering ourselves completely we must evoke His grace and attain Him. This is the message of Andal in her two immortal works.

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TONDARADIPPODI ALVAR

(Vipranarayana)

The asterism of Kettai of the month of Margali (Dhanus) (December–January) is a glorious one. It is the day on which the greatest of the devotees of Lord Ranganatha of Srirangam, Vipranarayana, popularly known as Tondaradipoddi Alvar (Bhakta Pada Renu) was born. He was considered according to traditional account a manifestation of Lord

Vishnu's Vanamala (garland of forest flowers) called Vaijayanti as he spent all his life in dedicating garlands to Ranganatha.

He was born in a village called Madangudi in Tanjore district in an orthodox Brahmin family. He was named as Vipranarayana. He was given education in all vedas and sastras and the sattvaguna was predominant in him. After completing his course of studies, he came to Srirangam. He was enchanted by the Divya mangalavigraha of Lord Ranganatha as the Rishis were entranced by the beauty of Rama in the Dandaka forest. He decided to live a quiet and unaustentatious life by cultivating a flower garden and dedicating the flowers with tulasi leaves to the Lord every day. In this respect he resembles Periyalvar and Malaka of Bhagavata Purana.

One day he was toiling in his garden entirely oblivious of the outside world. A dancing girl by name Devadevi of tempting features and winning manners was returning with her sister from the court of Chola king in Uraiyur in Tiruchirapalli district. She cast a glance on Vipranarayana and was struck by his pious disposition. As she wended her way with her sister, their conversation turned on Vipranarayana. She extended a challenge to her sister that she could win the love of every one including the pious and orthodox Brahmin, Vipranarayana by the charm of her beauty.

Devadevi hit upon a plan to captivate the poor Vipranarayana. She appeared before him and expressed to him her intense desire to participate in the service rendered by him day by day. Vipranarayana agreed and she, true to her word, co-operated with him in his various activities for months together. One evening as there was heavy downpour of rain she could not go home and she was forced to spend the night in Vipranarayana's hut. She got her opportunity and made him fall a victim to her temptations.

Before the end of year, Vipranarayana had degraded himself having lost all claims to reverence. All his thoughts were centred on her and he had long before relinquished his task of cultivating the flower garden. Months passed. Vipranarayana became a totally different person.

He was so much in the grip of lust and passion that he squandered all his wealth on Devadevi. On the day he became penniless, he was mercilessly turned out of her house, and he spent the time in dire distress and grief.

God will never desert his devotees. Krishna guaranteed. in Bhagavad Gita 'Name bhaktah pranasyatti (IX-31) (my devotee never perishes). Lord Ranganatha taking pity on the wertched condition of his devotee undertook to reclaim him. He assumed the form of a temple servant and carried a golden bowl belonging to the temple to Devadevi's house, presented it to her stating that it was from her lover, Vipranarayana and that he desired to meet her that night. At the same time he told Vipranarayana that Devadevi desired to meet him that night. Both met that night and spent a very happy time.

The next morning, the Lord's bowl was found missing. After a vigorous search it was found in the house of Devadevi. She was summoned to the palace of the king to depose before the king and she admitted it was given to her by a servant of Vipranarayana. When Vipranarayana was questioned he pleaded complete ignorance of the whole affair, whereupon the king put him in prison. Again the agony of his devotee moved the Lord to appear before the king in his dream and reveal the part he played out of compassion for His devotee. The king freed Vipranarayana who strung with remorse for his wretched past expiated his sins by purificatory deeds such as the drinking of the water washed out of the feet of the devotees of the Lord. He did this on obtaining expert advice The practice of collecting and drinking water washed out of the feet of Bhagavatas is still in vogue and is resorted to in Vaishnavite homes on occasions of marriage and ceremonies.

Vipranarayana went with profound sorrow and tearful eyes and stood before the Lord Ranganatha recapitulating his heinous deeds and sining in praise of the Lord for his compunction and shower of grace for his reclaimation despite his unworthiness. Real wisdom dawned on him and he became an Alvar. He continued to do kainkarya of supplying garlands as before and attained Lord's feet after having lived for 105 years.

Devadevi hearing of the salvation obtained by Vipranarayana who loved her intensely, grieved in repentance for her ungrateful behaviour and got disgusted with her immoral life. She dedicated her belongings to Lord Ranganatha and began to lead a religious life of service at His feet and eventually attained salvation. If there is a spark of devotion in any heart,God will ablaze it with a flame of purifyink life. This is the nature of His grace.

The story of Vipranarayana is the story of a sinner turned into a saint like Bilvamangal of North India and Vemanna of Andhra Desa,who with the divine wisdom gained with the grace of God poured out his heart in verse. His works are only twoone 'Tirumalai' containing 45 verses and the other 'Tirupallieluchi' containing 10 verses.

His Tirupalli-eluchi is suprabhatam to Lord Ranganatha and is comparable in many respects to the Tirupalli – eluchi of Manieka Vachagar in Tamil and Suprabhatam to Lord Venkateswara of Tirumalai Tirupati Hills. The Alvar wakes up the sleeping Beauty of the Lord who is ever awake and alive to the needs of his devotees.The poem is also a typical example of pastoral poetry : To quote two passages as instances :

"The fragrant lotus open their rosy eyes
When, kissing, springs the sun the eastern wave,
Your beauteous maids have bathed and dressing dry,
their glossy locks Hence pray awake O Lord !
That sleep's the sacred Cauvery amidst and
haste to bless this worm, my puny self
who waits thy doors with lous of Tulasi wreathes
And make me thrall of thralls of that serve thy feet.

"The fiery sun rides on the eastern Mount
And dawn has chased the puling darkness thick.
The floral sweets brim over their beauteous cup Each of

the songs is so moving that they are sung in every Vaishnava temple at the approach of dawn to wake up the sleeping Beauty.

The second poem TIRUMALAI which is considered to expound the importance of Nama sankirtana is noteworthy for the minute autobiographical details and also for religious fervour. He sings :

" I was a thief. My associates were all drawn from the low strata of society and I was wallowing in sin, a willing slave to the fish eyed·damsels – even to such a one like me came relief and redemption The beautiful one who rescued me by lifting me up from that state and became thenceforth the object of my love and adoration, resides in Srirangam".

The bhakti of the Alvar is a typical example of dasya bhava. His self–surrender to the Lord by absolute self–renunciation and sincere repentance for the sins committed is a classical example of true saranagati. Even the pleasures of sovereignty in swarga were nothing to him compared with the bliss of kainkarya or service at the feet of Lord Ranganatha.

He further sings :
Should men live for one hundred years as the Vedas
sing
One half will be wasted in sleep ; the fifty remaining
will be likewise wasted
In childhood, boyhood sensulity, hunger disease
and old age,
O dweller in Srirangaml ! desire birth no more".
"I have no place to call my own : I have no plot of
land nor have I any kin.
O Great God ! I have not grasped Thy feet,
O cloud-dark one ! O beautiful-eyed I Icry
Who is there to succour me ! O dweller in the city".

Sentiments such as the following will not fail to move the readers and kindle religious fevour. "There is no purity in mind ; no good word on the tip of my tongue. I am full of untruth and falsity ; without feelings of shame and disgrace, I have ventured to come and stand before you. I am not given to worship you with choice flowers morning, noon and evening ; I am not accustomed to speak of your auspicious qualities in faultless words ; nor is my heart imbued with feelings of love towards thee. I have nothing. I am nothing to thee. O' why I was born ?"

These confessions will also impress on the reader the fact that God,the Self of the self and who is always residing in the sanctury of his heart cannot be deceived as He is jnata (knower) and witness of everything.

The life of the Alvar also points out that Kainkarya to God includes kainkarya to devotees also. It looks as if he sang all his 55 verses to obtain a boon from the Lord viz to be made the servant of His Bhaktas. Ranganatha was everything to him.He was so much attached to Him that he would not mention the name of the God of any other shrine in any of his verses.

The name of Ranganatha was a taraka mantra to him. It represents not only beauty and splendour but also all virtues. all goodness and other attributes of the Lord. The sweetness, spontaneity, grace and suggestiveness of the name have an insistent appeal to the heart of the saint. The name was to him the seed of the tree of spirituality,fountainhead of all blessings, the destroyer of all impurities and a heaven of peace and real happiness on earth.

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Tiruppanalvar. (Munivahana)

The history of Vaishnavisim shows that in its early days the members of the ' untouchable ' classes or Harijans had been kept in bondage and in darkness They had been denied the privileges of learning and worship. They had been shut out from love and social intercourse. They had been despised, ill-treated and kept low. But amidst their degradation and misery some of them have struggled on towards light and won a place for themselves in the mannals of Vaishnavism

One such holy personage was Panan, who became later Tiruppanalvar. He was an embodiment of God – centred life and a 'Perfect image of the life Divine in the mirror of human existence'.

Panan belonged to woraiyur in Tiruchirappali district which lies on the southern bank of the river Cauvery, just opposite to the temple of Ranganatha of Srirangam. He was born in the month of Kartikai (November - December) under the influence of the asterism of Rohini.

According to traditional account, he was picked up from a rice field by a man of the panar class who felt glad that it should have been his lot to possess such a heaven – dropped child. As they had no issue, the husband and wife cherished and fondled the baby and brought it up.

He evinced no taste for the glamour of the world. He picked up a good knowledge of music and was able to play on the veena. He began to spend his life singing the praise of God to the accompaniment of veena. His God passion comparable only to that of the Gopies to Krishna was very intense. He was a yogi, singer and vainika. So deep was his absorption while singing the praises and attributes of the Lord that he would lose all outward consciousness.

Panan resembled in many respects Narada Maharishi. To both, veena instrument was inseparable. It formed part and parcel of their body. Both were gayakendras or master singers. Yoga and music are both declared by the Rishis to be the Sadhanas for communion with God. Both Narada and Panan had combined in them the fullness of both.

On account of his low birth. Panan would not go near Lord Ranganatha or even to Srirangam, crossing the river Cauvery. He built a small hut on the southern bank of the Cauvery and sang rapturously on the glory of the Lord to the accompaniment of his veena. Not infrequently did he use to go into trance. He lived like Nanda, the great Saivaite saint, and developed an irrepressible longing to obtain the grace of Lord, Ranganatha and to quench the divine thirst.

One day, an attendant of the Lord, Lokasaranga by name was returning to the temple with water for the holy ablutions of the Lord. He came near Panan who was in a trance. Not knowing that he was in a trance and eagerly anxious to get back to the temple, Lokasaranga called him aloud two or three times but there was no rensponse At last, he warned Panan by flinging a stone at him from a distance. It hit the saint on his forehead and blood began to ooze. Regaining consciousness by the stone - hit and realising that he had stood in the way of the devotee taking water to the Lord, he begged pardon of the Lokasaranga for his offence and ran away from the spot with the blood flowing from the face, trembling in his frame. No Soonerhad Lokasaranga reached the temple than he found to his utter surprise and disappointment the temple doors closed from within. The usual bathing time of the Lord was already over. All devotees came to the temple and stood before it with awe and wonder. Lokasaranga Muni was suddenly reminded of his creul act of his having hit Panan with a stone. With folded hands he implored the mercy of the Lord. That night Ranganatha presented Himself to Lokasaranga in his dream and beckoned him to get Panan on his back to His vicinity in the sanctum of the temple. This set at rest the anxiety and mental agony of the Muni.

At day dawn, Lokasaranga ran like a mad man to the abode of Panan, conveyed to him the Lord's command and requested him to get up on his shoulder. Panan uttered :

> " What do I hear ? I ... a paria ... a low born ...
> unfit even to go near you ... a Brahman ...
> I am an outcast ... an untouchable ... unfortunate ...
> unfit even to approach the temple road-... I, to
> get upon ... Your shoulders and go to the Sanctum ...
> of Ranganatha'. Ah Ranga ! what is your will ?

Panan whose religion was implicity obedience to the Lord and His devotees felt himself bound to obey though much against his will on account of his low birth. Since then Panan came to be called Munivahana.

In the Sanctum of the temple, Panan got down Lokasaranga's shoulders. He saw before him the Lord in all His glory and splendour. He enjoyed the charming and entrancing beauty of the form of the Lord, limb by limb and then as a whole. Hardly had he finish the fountain drinking of beauty and grace, when the Lord embraced him. Panan became one with the Holy of the Holies.The individual soul of Panan merged into the Supreme soul. Panan became Tirupanalvar.

Like Nandanar, Panan symbolises the truth that one can attain spiritual savlation irrespective of caste or creed. Birth has never determined the nobility of souls. The life of the God - intoxicated soul of Panan also brings home the truth that the barriers of caste, creed etc. are frail indeed and that with the divine touches all these walls crumble down.

The tradition is that the Alvar was an avataram of the Nitya Angel Srivatsa on the Lord's bosom with celestial incorporeal body seeming as human and mortal. This perhaps has some support from Panan's own description : "It is the Lord's bosom graced by Lakshmi that has taken me as a perpetual servant".

The Kathopanishad says "One can attain Brahman only when It seeks Johim him the Atman reveals its being. Lord Ranganatha out of grace caused Panan to be brought to his presence and allowed to drink His divine beauty.After he had finished enjoyment, the Lord gathered him into Himself. Salvation to an individual soul is not possible except without God's grace.

Panan has described his experiences in his poem entitled 'Amalanadipiran'. This was his only work containing only ten verses and he has described therein his 'mystic experiences so as to benefit and guide humanity along the safe and sure path towards the attainment of spiritual glory.It is a padadi Kesanta stotra on the Lord of Srirangam and is unrivalled in Tamil devotion literature for its felicity of expression and devotional rapture. The last three verses form the climax of the experiences of the saint and he after having enjoyed the form of Ranganatha did not care to look at any other object mundane or even divine.

He sings :

> 'My eyes have feasted on my Lord's nectarian sight
> They henceforth will not look at any other sight."

Though it is a small one and contains only ten verses it has been uniformly and authoritatively held by the commentators like Vedanta Desika that it comprises in itself the essence of Vedic and Vedantic truths. In fact,it is spoken of a seed from which the vedic tree has grown so large and huge.By a close study and exposition of these stanzas. Vedanta desika proclaims that he had been called 'Vedantacharya'.

It is considered that the Alvar had in mind the Dhyana sloka of Vishnu Sahasranamam beginning with 'Santhakarm, The tamil equivalents of the names of the Lord mentioned therein occur in the verses of the poem of the Alvar The first three verses of the poem begin with 'Amalan', 'Uvandha'.and 'Mandhi.The first letters in these three words are Akara Ukara Makara–the letters making up the pranava mantra'AUM'.

The life of Panan stands out from the lives of other Alvars in some respects. They were only Yogis, In the case of Panan there was a happy blend of Yoga and music. The singing of the praises of the Lord to the accompaniment of veena is reported to have created a deep – rooted impression on Lord Ranganatha and His spouse and aroused his compassion and vatsalya.

It is seen in the case of other Alvars that they themselvs went and panted for union with the Lord. The reverse was the case with Panan. Even Panan felt very delicate to touch Srirangam. The Lord forced himself on him and absorbed him unto Himself. This inculcates the truth that the Lord needs His devotees more than the devotees need Him.

The Upanishads speak about – two paths by which a departed soul proceeds to enjoy moksha or liberation.One is called the Devayana or the path of Light and the other Pitriyana or the path of darkness.He,who goes to Devayana, does not come to this world, but he, who goes to the pitriyana after enioying the fruits of his good acts, comes back to this world. In the Case of Panan, there was a short cut. He went on the shoulders of Lokasarang Muni and became one with the Lord.

Panan was the embodiment of Krishna Trishna Tattva viz. the embodiment of a unquenchable thirst for Krishna. He was born under the same austerism as Krishna who was light. life and love to him. To him Lord Ranganatha was no other than Krishna Himself. He has referred to the effects of his love for Krishna thus :

Eyes drunk with His beauty, will they ever wander to transient joys and delusions of earth ".

The heart of a saint is the eternal abode of God. He is a dasa of God and doer of His behests. Tirupanalvar was a great saint and a true Mahatma. The yogic experiences of the Alvar are considered so precious that Vedant Desika has composed a work entitled. " Munivahana Bhigam ". According to traditional account, the Alvar lived for only 50 years.

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Tirumangai Alvar

The asterism of Kritigai in the month of Kartigai (November-December) is considered glorious as the king o' Mangai (Parakala Kavi or Tirumangai Alvar) of established fame alighted on earth It is also considered a famous day as the Alvar, the last of twelve Alvars, was to contribute six Tamil works which are the six angas to the four Tamil Vedas sung by Nammalvar. He is considered according to tradition, a manifestation of Vishnu's Saranga bow. He was chatushkavi sikhamani, the crest jewel among the Tamil poets accomplished in four kinds of poetry.

He came of the family of Kallas, the name of his father being Neelan and was born at Tirukuriyalur near Sirkali in Tanjore district. The name given to him at birth was Neelan apparently owing to the blue colour of his complexion. He became proficient in sword playing, archery, and other arts consistent with the traditions of his community. By dint of his boundless courage and heroic talents, be became a military chieftain under the Chola king. Tirumangai being the name of his capital, he came to be known as Tirumangai Mannan. He has himself made references about his prowess in his hymns.

There lived a Vaishnavaite doctor in Tirunangur, a village nearby, who had a foster daughter by name Kumudavalli who was very handsome and also pious. Neelan fell in love with her and offered to marry her. She stipulated that she would only marry a vira (staunch) Vaishnava of good conduct and that he should feed 1008 Vaishnavas daily Neelan at once hurried to an acharya and converted himself into a Vaishnava with dwadasa nama or twelve caste marks on his body and also agreed to abide by the other condition stipulated by her. The marriage took place eventually.

On account of heavy expenditure on the feeding of 1008 Vaishnavaites every day, he could not pay the tribute due to the Chola king and was put into prison. As he had no other way, he prayed to God for succour. He got his release by paying off the amount out of a treasure obtained by the grace of the God, Arulalaperumnal of Kancheepuram.

Even after release he continued to feed 1008 Vaishnavities as usual. As the expenditure increased inordinately, he was again faced with a financial stringency. He resorted to high robbery as an expedient to find money, But he decided to rob only rich people. He thus became a god communist'. In the course of waylaying the travellers and depriving them, he had to deal one night with God Himself who had decided to bless him for his acts of service and devotion, though the means employed were unrighteous

The Lord and His Divine consort assuming forms came in sight of the saint. Both of them were decked with costly ornaments from head to foot. The Alvar stopped them and forced them to part with the jewels which they did most willingly A noopura or ring in the toe of the Lord was so tight that it had to be removed with the aid of his teeth. In the course of his act, his head cameinto contact with the Lord's feet-a contact for which every one hankers.

The Alvar made abundle of all jewlels and proceeded to walk away with it. But it was too heavy. He suspected that the Lord had uttered some mantra and threatened. Him on the point of dagger to disclose it.The spiritual crisis came. The Lord as Guru (Acharya) initiated the Alvar by giving Upadesa (teaching) of the Ashatakshara Mantra-'Om Namo Narayanaya' the mantra of mantras which made light work of the heaviest sins. The initiation of the Lord as also the touch of the Lord's feet instantly brought about a spiritual metamorphosis and Tirumangai Mannan became an Alvar. His heart became the sanctum of Narayana. The name of 'Narayana' was always on his lips

The Ashtakshara mantra is a sheet anchor for crossing the samsaric ocean.The greatness of the mantra will be clear from Narayana Upanishad and commentaries on it written by great Acharyas like Pillai Lokacharya and Vedanta Desika. The mantra itself shows the different kinds of relation subsisting between God the soul 1) God as sire 2) God as saviour 3) All souls exist for Him 4) God as spouse 5) God the Conscious Soul 6) God the owner, the soul the chattel. 7) The soul is His body and God is the seat. 8) God the enjoyer of all souls. It is for understanding the significance and different interpretations of this mantra that Ramanuja went eighteen times to Tirukoshtiyur to have his study under Nambi and in utter disobedience of his master's orders, he revealed the importance of the mantra to all for the sake of their salvation in life.

As directed by the Lord he travelled on foot from Badari on the Himalayas to the extreme south of India visiting the famous Vaishnavaite shrines singing the glory of God and enjoying the archa forms in an immense measure. He saw varied visions of beauty in the archa forms,and also different sets of attributes. He visualised in the course of his worship, the varied incarnations of God,especially of Krishna owing to his soulabhya or easy accessibility even to the worst sinner. So far as information is available he had visited 85 out of 108 important shrines. He had covered the greatest number of shrines all over India.

The temple at Srirangam owes a good deal to the munificence of Alvar who is said to have built some of the Prakaras (surrounding walls) besides construction of mandapas. renovation of towers etc. To meet the expenditure of such big undertakings, he plundered a gold image of Buddha at Nagapattanam in Tanjore district which amply served the purpose.

He brought architects from all over the country and made them payments substantially and regulary. Some of the kings, of their own accord, sent money to the Alwar and lent the services of good architects, as they were fully convinced that he was a very great devotee. He became famous and popular still he led a very simple life.

In all his activities, he was assisted by four devout disciples who were as heroic as their master. The first was Tola Valakkan or (the Polemic par excellence). He came to have this name because none could defeat him in controvery. The name of the second diseiple was Taludhuvan which means the opener of doors : He could open any lock by a mere puff of his breath without the help of any key. The name of the third was Nilalai Mithippam' meaning the ' shadow catcher'. He whose shadow he touched with his feet would lose his power of movement. The name of the fourth disciple was 'Neermel Nadappan' or 'walker on water'. He could stroll about on water just as he could on land. Each of them thus possessed a special characteristic.

The Alvar is claimed in the Guruparamparai to have been invited during his visit to Sirkali by Tirugnana Sambandar, the great Saiva saint for a religious discussion and the Alvar accepted the challenge and scored a point over his adversary. He was thereupon given the name of Parakala Kavi. After having lived for 105 years, he left the world.

Traditional account also states that when the Alvar built the fourth prakara of Srirangam Temple,he was obliged to construct it slightly out of its proper alignment lest he should disturb the Tulasi garden of Tondaridipoddi Alvar for which act, the latter expressed his gratitude by calling one of the implements used by him as 'arulmari'.

Inspired by the grace of God and enlightement received from the Ashtakshara mantra, the Alvar began to sing about the glory of God in all its varied aspects. He has sung 1361 pasurams or verses which constitute six prabandams or separate works. This first of the six known as Periya Tirumoli which is his magnum opus consists of 1084 stanzas. He describs at the outset his exaltation in having realised the greatness and efficacy of the name of Narayana. He has expressed his sentiments thus : I suffered, and was immersed in endless and bottomless sorrow and wasted my life till now in quest of true happiness in association with the youths and their pursuits and found them all to be wholly false, degrading and disintegrating. Then I rose to the consciousness that the only anchor in life which assures us peace, joy and redemption is the blessed name 'Narayana'. The efficacy and extraordinary power of the name 'Narayana' I have found out and realised in my experience. It works for good in the universe, bestows prestige and honour, confers wealth, dispels the miseries of the devotees, grants moksha, endows us with lordship over earth, gives us power and every thing else and blesses us with those things which even a mother cannot do".

His lyrical utterances reveal his change of heart, his moral earnestness and mystic fervour. In his relentless self-examination and self - condemnation, he stands out among the Alvars and Acharyas. His songs also emphasise that prapatti to archa is the way to attain moksha and that it is only by absolute self-surrender to His mercy that the sinner is forgiven and saved,

In experssing devotion to God, The Alvar adopts bridal mysticism or nayaka-nayika Bhava. He is captivated by the enchanting beauty of God. God plays with him the game of ' hide and seek' to stablise bakti or devotion. The sorrows of separation are more intense and last longer. In regard to love in separation, there are three definite stages of distress, depression and defiance. The bride pines away in distress She becomes weak and pale. Every moment of separation is like a yuga. She has no thought of food or drink and she spands sleepless days and nights. The sorrow increasas with continued disappointment. The fond mother of the bride is distressed by the failing health and sick-mindedness of the daughter and in her forlorn state, she implores God to have mercy on her daughter. The crisis is reached. The sorrow of separation deepenes at last into furious assaults on God, as the Gruel love who in His Game of love leads rhe beloved in her agony of separation into the mood of dasperate **defiance** known in Tamil as resort to Madal. The game ends finally in mystic reunion. In his works of Siriya Tirumadal and Periya Tirumadal, this convention of Tamil poetry has been employed with inimitable simplicity and spiritual sincerity.

In his works 'Tirukurunthandagam' and 'Tiruvezhukutirukkai' he surrenders to God as his support and refuge and yearns for release from samsara. The agonies of samsara are compared by him to the states of a storm-tossed tree, of the ant caught up between the burning ends of a faggot and a person facing cobra in his room. His last work 'Tirunedunthandagam' describes his experiences in the attainment of moksha like Nammalvar.

His hymns also contain references to the historial events of his time.They are full of attacks on Buddhism and Jainism. Sri, K. A. Nilakanta Sastriar in his 'Development of Religion in South India' has remarked "T o Saivism on the whole he evinced a more friendly attitude as to a colleague cooperating in the war against heresay and there are many resemblances in literary forms and religious sentiments between Tirujaan-Sambandar and Tiramangai Alvar which may explain the rise of the beautiful though unhistorical legend of their meeting".

As in the works of Nammalvar and other Alvars his hymns contain messages of exhortation to the devotees. The following are instances : "Fulfil your love, quench your passion by communion with the archa image of the most Beautiful and Merciful in temple with no other object than to move freely with devotees who seek him there". "You need not do penance, tapasya. Keep Narayana in your heart. Let us sing His glory ; let us dance in ecstacy. Let us hail his thousand names''.

The Alvar was a prolific writer and skilled versifier. He was highly proficient in four kinds of poetry – asu (sudden), vistara (elaborate), madura (sweet) and chitra (artistic). The words and metres used are such that they not only make his songs exquisite poetry but also capture the ear and ravish the soul. Their recitation will itself be Brahmanubhava to the devotee. The songs are also set to music tunes and sung in different ragas.

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REVIEWS

Avasthatraya Darshana Sudha :

(The Secret of Avasthatraya) by Shri Swamy Bramha-anandendra Saraswati. First Edition. Published by Adhyatma Prachara Sangha, Rayadurg in 1982. Pages : 84.

The booklet, Avasthatraya Darshana Sudha, has three sections named 'The Waking State', 'The Dream State ', and 'The State of Dreamless sleep'.

The author has attempted to explain all the features and secrets of Avasthatraya according to the " Shankara Bhasya on Gaudapada Karika".

Shri. P. Lakshmikantha Sharma, President Adhyatma Vichara Sangha, Rayadurg has rightly stated in his preface that this booklet will be the guide for those readers who try to seek the reality of the world through the Method of Avasthatraya.

The author has referred to the Bhagavatgeeta and the Upanishads during the course of the discussions.

The objections and clarifications in the booklet help the readers to grasp the subject-matter properly.

According to the author, the Avasthatraya occupies a significant place in Indian Philosophy. The author holds that the Waking Phenomena like the Dream Phenomena are illusory and unreal.

I feel that the author ought to have referred to Somnambulism and Somniloquy in the discussion of the sleep state. He has brought out the difference between sleep and sleepless Samadhi.

In the end, a reference has been made to the Turiya Avastha also.

There are some misprints in the booklet.

- Prof. S. N. Kulkarni.

Lokshankar Shrishankar by Shri Sadashiv Janardana Kadolikar B. A. (Hons.) LL. B. Advocate, Miraj Publisher : Shri S. J. Kadolikar, First Edition. Price : R, 3 Pages : 31. The Booklet under review gives a brief account of Shri Adishankaracharya's life, achievements and philosophy in Marathi.

It consists of seven chapters and may be divided into two parts.

The first five chapters deal with the biographical sketch and extraordinary achievements of Shri Shankaracharya. The last two chapters contain the philosophy of the Acharya in general and tha Advaita philosophy in particular.

It is gratifying to note that the author has cleverly covered all the significant events and incidents of his life in a nutshell.

Different facets of the resourceful,towering and gigantic personality of the Acharya have been narrated.

The philosophy of the Acharya has been presented very clearly and lucidly.

The booklet is mainly meant for the students and the laymen.

Questions given at the end serve a good purpose.

The foreword written by Prin. Narhar Kurundkar in the form of Puraskar is worth reading and thought Provoking.

The simple and pithy style of the booklet is to be appreciated. It may be said that repetition has crept in the explaination of the philosophy.

The author deserves our congratulations.

Prof. S. N. Kulkarni

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